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This collection of 29 succinct information articles discusses issues relating to language arts, including whole language, phonics, student evaluation, spelling, and censorship. Some of the authors contributing to the collection are Ken Goodman, Yetta Goodman, Jerome Harste, Patrick Shannon, and Constance Weaver. Titles of articles are: "Learning to Talk, Learning to Read, Learning to Write"; "What Is Whole Language"; "What Whole Language Is Not: Common Myths and Misunderstandings"; "Some Key Principles of a Whole Language Perspective on Learning and Teaching"; "How Whole Language Teachers Develop Phonics 'Know How'"; "Research in Support of Whole Language"; "Whole Language Is as American as Apple Pie"; "Reading in Whole Language Classrooms: Focus on Comprehension"; "What about Skills in Whole Language Classrooms?"; "Whole Language and the Theological Concerns and Beliefs of Parents"; "Phonics Phacts"; "Phonics and Dialects of English"; "Phonics Is a Flawed System"; "Why We Should Not Teach Intensive, Systematic Phonics"; "Phonics versus Whole Language: Why Whole Language Teachers Don't Think It Is Much of a Debate"; "Why a Whole Language Classroom May Be the Best Place for Your Attention Deficit Disorder Hyperactive (ADHD) Student"; "Basal Reading Programs, Literature-Based Reading Programs, and Literature Programs"; "How to Teach Literacy Learners Who Challenge Teachers"; "What Does It Mean to Be Literate?"; "Adult Illiteracy: Cause? Effect?"; "Questions and Answers about Spelling"; "What Are Some Tools Teachers Use to Evaluate That Also Help Children Learn?"; "Some Aspects of Assessment That We Often Forget"; "Who Should Evaluate? What Should Be Evaluated?"; "The Mixed Age Primary: What and Why"; "Bilingual Learners: Principles That Help; False Assumptions That Harm"; "Why Thoughtful Teachers Abhor Censorship"; "Statement of the International Reading Association: The Dangers of Censoring Textbooks and Reading Program Materials"; and "How Teachers Can Productively Respond to Political Conflicts about Education in Their Communities." (RS)

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# LANGUAGE ARTS TOPICS AND EDUCATIONAL ISSUES:

# INFORMATION SHEETS

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# Learning to Talk, Learning to Read, Learning to Write

When a new baby is born, parents and loved ones typically gather round it, expecting and encouraging it to act like a human being. That includes talking and communicating, so fond parents and grandparents, older sisters and brothers, neighbors and babysitters coo at the baby and TALK to it. They act as if the baby can understand and if the baby shows any response at all, they announce: "She likes that!" or "He understands!"

As soon as the baby begins babbling, loved ones begin to "up the ante" as Jerome Bruner calls it, beginning to encourage the child to babble and reproduce certain kinds of babble, especially the sounds that are like Mama or Dada or other family names. Almost universally, parents and loved ones adjust their voices and ways of talking to young babies and toddlers, encouraging and treating them like talkers.

Similarly, we have learned that many parents in print cultures treat their children as if they are readers and writers from a very early age. They accept the children's attempts to scribble or pretend to read from their picture books, newspapers, or other print close at hand.

Two things are important both with children's early attempts to talk and their early attempts to read and write. First, their loved ones treat them as if they can and will do these things and accept the little ones' slightest attempts—encouraging them, but without drills and reprimands. Second, the loved ones set up routines, practices that they do over and over with the child, usually playfully. These routines, like patty-cake play, let the child know what to expect and where he or she fits in.

Playing patty-cake and peek-a-boo, reciting nursery rhymes, telling favorite stories, reading religious texts, reading storybooks, and many other such routines seem to help children with their oral and written language development. These often vary across cultures but they seem to accomplish the same thing: they help the child become part of the speaking and reading/writing community.

One such routine is the bedtime story. When parents read to children at bedtime (or other times), they may simply be thinking of sharing with their child books that they have known and loved. But researchers tell us that they are also sharing knowledge about how reading is done. Children usually ask for the same book or books to be read over and over; they seem to want the routines and repetition. Even babblers often "read" the books while their parents read to them. Toddlers can be seen "reading" to their dolls or stuffed animals. Without drilling their children, these parents are showing how story reading is done and that its first function is one of pleasure and enjoyment. Thus they set up expectations that children will comprehend what is in books. They also demonstrate that the same words will be read over and over from the same book, so there is an expectation that the child will have to learn how to do this.

Gradually, children begin to notice that it is the print that the parents are reading from. This understanding comes about late, though it still comes long before the child is ready to begin figuring out the print by himself or herself. When children are born into a culture saturated with print, they begin very early to notice the print, to pretend to read, then later to read the bedtime storybook alone (if bedtime stories are part of their routine), and eventually, sometime between 5 and 8 years of age, to begin to read conventionally (to read new text alone).

The bedtime storybook routine is important but not essential. In some families, it is replaced by other routines with printed texts. We don't know as much about these texts, but there are stories of children learning to read from scripture, from billboards and package labels, and from grocery lists. There is evidence that a rich participation in all kinds of reading and writing activities is especially helpful.

Writing is also extremely important. In attempts to write, children are learning all kinds of things about writing and about reading. Parents are often worried about little ones hurting themselves with pencils or pens and about them writing on important belongings, so a routine needs to be established so children can write without these fears. Children's early writing will look like aimless scribble, just as their early talking may have sounded like senseless babble. But this writing soon begins to show repeated shapes. As with storybook reading, researchers have documented patterns of development from scribble up to readable and conventional writing. (Most of this research has been done with children learning to write an alphabetic language like English or Spanish. Similar but not identical patterns appear in languages such as Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.) Along the way, the child will often draw and call it writing. Frequently, the young child's drawing and writing will look distinctively different even

though the child's writing may include various marks and strings of letters that do not even look like words to the parents.

A very big and important development in the learning of alphabetic languages is when the child begins to spell words phonetically. This shows that the child is beginning to understand that language has a phonetic system; it is the same kind of understanding that many teachers try to develop through phonics lessons. Research is showing us that children who are encouraged to write often use their own ways of spelling, sometimes called invented or temporary spelling, in kindergarten and first grade, but they ALSO spell many words "correctly" from ages 3 to 4 on. They spell words conventionally and inventively at the same time. The words that they spell conventionally are at first simply visual memories of what the child has seen in print; children do not immediately understand what "correct" spelling means. Gradually, and with teachers' help, they begin to understand how the phonetic and the visually remembered elements help in writing and reading.

The most important understanding about both reading and writing is that they are meaningful things that human beings do. The skills needed to decode or to encode (write) are easily learned by a curious child, eager to communicate, who understands this most important idea: that print is supposed to make sense and be created and used for some purpose. Just as with talking, if we support the child's attempts to read and write and if we form an appreciative audience for those attempts, we will provide the most helpful support. But what about just straight-out teaching our children? With young children, the best times to "teach" new things are when children ask us questions. Young children's questions are usually either very specific or "unanswerable"—that is, they may be so complex that we do not know how to answer them, such as "Where does the sun go at night?" or the everpresent "Why?" You will soon know how to answer your child's questions because, if you get too specific or too teachy, the child will stop listening. If you aren't answering to the child' satisfaction, he or she may cry or give up. The most important teaching you can do is show love and concern and pride in your child's reading and writing attempts—the same love and concern and pride you took in your toddler's early talking efforts.

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# What Is Whole Language

**Whole language is theoretically-based instructional practice.** Another way to say that is: **Whole language is a perspective on learning and teaching based on a number of fundamental theoretical assumptions.** Some of these assumptions are:

- Learning is social
- Making sense of things is a major part of learning
- Learning requires active involvement on the part of the learner
- Learning requires taking risks and experimenting
- In learning, people relate what is new to what is known
- People's purposes for learning become part of what they learn
- Written language is learned like oral language.

Teachers who hold these assumptions try to create classrooms where students can experiment and be actively involved, where students can use many different communication systems (language, mathematics, art, music, drama, and others) as vehicles for exploration. These teachers use a variety of teaching strategies and materials depending on the needs and interests of individual students. They base their instructional decisions on their theories about learning and about what they know about the individual learners in their classroom.

One of the important theoretical beliefs in a whole language perspective is that the development of written language parallels the development of oral language. There is now substantial research demonstrating that children learn to talk through interaction with their parents, other adults, and children, not through lessons. Through experiences with others who use language with them, children figure out what people mean and how they can express their own meaning. They play and experiment with the sounds, structure, and meanings of language. By using language with others, they engage in a continual and largely unconscious process of inducing the rules of the language spoken around them. Children's "errors" provide insight into their hypotheses about language. For example, when children say "two childs", they are not imitating someone. Instead, they are showing that they think it is necessary to add the sound of "z" to indicate a plural, just as the adults around them add the sound of "z" to "boy" to indicate "two boys". (It takes them longer to figure out the exceptions than to figure out the general rule.)

Our understanding of spoken language development provides a great deal of insight into how children learn to read and write. As they see written language being used around them and with them, as they hear oral stories and as they are read to, children take on the structure of written language and the shape of stories. Children know a lot about written language before coming to school. As they explore written language, they use many of the same strategies they developed while learning oral language. Learning to write cannot be separated from learning to read. Children who explore writing through the use of functional temporary (sometimes called "invented") spelling develop a sense of themselves as writers, just as children who are encouraged to guess what the signs say in their environment, to look at books and to talk about them with adults, develop a sense of themselves as readers.

A whole language curriculum focuses on learning, on making sense, on using language and enjoying it. From a whole language perspective, skills are learned and taught as they are used, not as something separate from making sense. Various literacy skills (such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, textual organization and so on) are learned in the context of real, functional language use rather than through fragmented drill exercises.

A whole language curriculum is dynamic and evolving. It emphasizes positive responses to children's language learning and to their learning in general. It builds on children's experiences within their own culture and surrounding cultures. It aims to immerse children in a world of communicative, captivating print. It provides situations in which children can use language for their own purposes. In such an environment, children not only become literate; they learn to appreciate and value literacy. They are encouraged to think about how their reading and writing experiences relate to their growing personal well-being and their growing ability to be citizens in a democratic society.

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# What Whole Language Is Not: Common Myths and Misunderstandings

1. Whole language is just another name for the whole word, or "look-say" approach. Not true. **First of all, unlike the whole word approach, whole language is a perspective, not an approach or a method.** "Whole word" is an approach to help children "get words." It is not a perspective on learning in general, as whole language is. In a whole word approach, teachers emphasize learning basic sight words prior to reading meaningful text. In whole language classrooms, teachers assist children in reading predictable and meaningful text. What whole language teachers do not do, however, is emphasize the identification of words at the expense of constructing meaning.

2. Whole language teachers don't teach skills such as phonics. Not true. **Whole language teachers DO teach needed skills and strategies.** They teach them as necessary within the context of reading a variety of genres and writing for a variety of purposes and audiences. What whole language teachers don't teach is skills isolated from their use or artificially contrived skills lessons. Whole language teachers know that no one can read an alphabetic language without taking into account the connection between sounds and symbols. But these connections are not the only cues readers use to make sense of what they're reading. Cues about meaning and language structure, pictorial cues, and cues to general knowledge about the subject are just as important as sound-letter connections. Whole language teachers help children learn how to use all the important cues as they read.

3. Whole language teachers don't do any direct teaching. Not true. **Whole language teachers DO teach directly.** They teach directly within the context of reading and writing and exploring concepts across the curriculum, rather than in isolated lessons. What whole language teachers don't do is teach bits and pieces of language in a teach/practice/test format or teach lessons that are unrelated to students' demonstrated needs. Whole language teachers know that spelling, punctuation, and handwriting are important because they help the writer make meaning clearer for readers. They know that when children have real audiences, they have reason to pay attention to the conventions of written language. When it seems appropriate, then, whole language teachers may offer direct lessons on such topics to individuals, groups, or the whole class.

4. Whole language education is just a matter of teaching skills in context, rather than in isolation. Not true. **Whole language is much more than teaching or learning skills in context.** While it is true that a whole language perspective is based on evidence that children learn skills while engaging in authentic acts of reading and writing, and while it is not necessary, therefore, to contrive artificial activities for teaching skills in context, skills for their own sake are not what whole language is about. There is a world of difference in purposefulness and authenticity between, on the one hand, teaching a child to use quotation marks because her story for publication contains a lot of dialogue and, on the other, contriving a writing activity that contains dialogue in order to have an excuse to teach quotation marks. The former is characteristic of a whole language curriculum; the latter is "skills in context."

5. Whole language teachers don't assess and evaluate students. Not true. **Whole language teachers DO evaluate, and they base their evaluations on a much broader range of assessment measures than do most traditional teachers.** Often, whole language teachers maintain for each student a portfolio containing samples of the student's writing, reading, and other work; systematic and anecdotal observations; notes on conferences and interviews; questionnaires and inventories; and excerpts from dialogue journals and learning logs. Periodically, both teacher and student review the student's work and consider ways in which the student might change. Thus, evaluation is an ongoing and integral part of whole language learning and teaching. Standardized testing is decontextualized, removed from day-to-day learning. In contrast, whole language evaluation is contextualized. It is contextualized in that it is based upon what the students are doing and learning daily. It is also contextualized in relation to standards. Standards for evaluation in whole language classrooms require considerations of purpose and context (a good set of notes for oneself may have different handwriting than notes to be used by another). What whole language teachers don't do is test students on isolated and irrelevant skills.

6. There is no structure in whole language classrooms. Not true. **Whole language classrooms ARE structured.** Whole language teachers provide substantial and consistent structure in order to enable their students to take increased responsibility for their own learning. Some of that structure is designed to promote collaboration—collaboration among students, between teacher and students, and between home and school. What whole language teachers don't do is adopt a structure imposed by a pre-packaged curriculum that is insensitive to children's needs and interests.

7. There are no specified expectations for students in a whole language classroom. Not true. **Whole language teachers expect children to grow in their competence as thinkers, speakers and listeners, readers and writers.** They expect children to grow in their understanding and control of their

world. Whole language teachers have sufficient understanding of literacy and conceptual development to facilitate, recognize, and document growth. What whole language teachers don't do is expect each child to learn the same things at the same time according to a predetermined scope and sequence chart or curriculum guide.

8. There is no research supporting whole language. Not true. **There is considerable research to support whole language.** There is a solid foundation of research stemming from cognitive psychology and learning theory, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, language acquisition and emergent literacy, as well as from education to support a whole language perspective. There is also a growing body of comparative research suggesting that whole language learning/teaching fosters a much richer range of literacy attitudes, abilities, and behaviors than more traditional approaches.

9. Anything that anybody chooses to call "whole language" is whole language. Not true. **Whole language is NOT everything that goes by that name.** Despite the diversity among whole language practitioners, there is a common core of beliefs that serve to characterize a whole language perspective. This core of beliefs provides a benchmark against which to assess the practices of those who claim to be implementing whole language or the materials touted as "whole language" by publishers.

10. You can buy whole language in a package. Not true. **Whole language is NOT the materials, NOT the curricular package, NOT the typical literacy activities associated with it.** Whole language is a set of beliefs, a way of looking at learning and teaching. Unless teachers have internalized that viewpoint, they may not use even the most holistic of materials appropriately. Holistic materials and activities do not, by themselves, constitute a whole language program or guarantee holistic teaching.

11. Only the best teachers can "do" whole language. Not true. **Anyone sincerely interested in becoming a whole language teacher can become one.** This myth about whole language being only for the best teachers is based on the implicit assumption that teachers cannot become more effective. But whole language educators reject that assumption. They believe instead that all individuals can grow and change. That includes teachers and administrators as well as students.

12. All you have to do to implement whole language is mandate it. Nothing could be much further from the truth. **Becoming a whole language teacher, administrator, school, or district requires that all involved develop a whole language perspective**, and that requires rejecting a "transmission" concept of learning in favor of a "transactional" concept. It takes a great deal of time and requires substantial encouragement and support for people to develop such a perspective.

Abbreviated and further adapted from Constance Weaver, Understanding Whole Language: From Principles to Practice, published in 1990 by Heinemann.

For further information:

Edelsky, C., Altwerger, B., & Flores, B. (1991). Whole language: What's the difference? Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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# Some Key Principles of a Whole Language Perspective on Learning and Teaching

**1. Authentic language and literacy experiences are central throughout the curriculum.** That means when students talk, read and write, they do so for some **communicative function**. They talk, read, and write to inform or to persuade or to wonder or to thank or to entertain, but not just to do lessons in talking or reading or writing. In whole language classrooms, teachers avoid assigning stilted texts or severely edited and excerpted materials characteristic of basal readers. Instead, children read real literature—whole books and texts that appeal to them. Whole language teachers also avoid asking children to fill in the blanks of workbooks, to merely copy what others have written, or to write on such topics as "The day I was a pencil." Instead, children are invited to write from personal experiences and to draw upon their experiences with literature to write poetry, fiction, memoir, and other kinds of literature; and to write to other audiences outside the classroom: pen pals, legislators, newspaper editors, environmental organizations, and other audiences they genuinely want to address for their own purposes.

**2. Skills are taught in the context of children's interests, needs and uses.** Students are not asked to deal with bits and pieces of language in isolation; whole texts in functional contexts provide the impetus for studying parts and pieces of language as needed (**whole-to-part and back to whole**, not part-to-whole). For example, students are taught to use punctuation when they want to make their writing clearer and more readable, not in isolated lessons on punctuation marks. Children are taught phonics during writing and reading. Teachers help young children write letters to represent the sounds in words; call attention to interesting sound elements like alliteration and rhyme in texts they have read together; and help children use phonic cues along with prior knowledge and context to identify words as they are reading.

**3. Learning is transactional; meaning is actively constructed by the learner.** This principle reflects the work of researchers and educators like Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Lev Vygotsky. What this means in practice is, for example, that children discuss books rather than answer pre-set questions. In the give-and-take of genuine discussion, children try out their interpretations of what they've read, listen to others' interpretations (including the teacher's), and thus, develop a richer understanding of the text. In other areas, too, the curriculum is planned so that students actively contruct meaning. For instance, they do their own science experiments rather than simply read about the results of others' experiments. They may also experiment with social roles in the classroom by developing a classroom governmental structure or by enacting conflicts such as those between environmentalists and developers who promise to enhance the economic base of the community. Such activity encourages students to be **engaged** in their learning.

**4. Teachers play various non-traditional roles in whole language classrooms.** In addition to directly teaching information, they often **share their knowledge** while **collaborating** with students on projects: doing experiments to determine effects of acid rain, writing a skit on the post-Civil War era, researching the lives of the Native Americans who once lived where their school now stands, and so forth. Frequently, they lead students in brainstorming, sharing, and extending what they know. They **facilitate** learning by **fostering a community of learners** in which all members of the classroom community share what they know and help each other solve problems. They **support learning by creating an environment in which students can take the risks necessary for significant learning**, however imperfect the students' efforts may be by adult standards. And one of the most important roles of the teacher is to model or **demonstrate** for the students. The best whole language teachers are themselves enthusiastic readers, writers, and learners who share that enthusiasm with their students. By being eager learners themselves, whole language teachers demonstrate for their students what it means to be a lifelong reader, writer, and learner.

**5. Teachers and students are all learners, risk-takers, and decision makers.** In whole language classrooms, teachers and students often collaborate in making curricular decisions. Teachers too take risks, trying new materials (e.g., trade books), new ways of organizing the curriculum (e.g., reading and writing workshops, theme study), and—perhaps most important of all—new ways of helping students learn and new ways of responding to students' efforts. By observing their students, teachers learn what kinds of assistance the students need and how they might modify their own teaching accordingly. And sooner or later, whole language teachers develop new ways of assessing students' learning and development, and of evaluating their own teaching as well.

**6. Choice is crucial in whole language classrooms.** As risk-takers and decision-makers themselves, students make many choices about their own learning, within parameters established by the teacher. Choices may be broad or relatively narrow. For example, during "choice" time, students may be free to choose any activity they might normally do in the classroom: read a self-chosen book, write whatever they want, carry out science experiments, work with math manipulatives, play in the "home" center, go to the library to find material on a particular topic and so on. Or the teacher may set aside a reading/writing time during which students are free to read or write anything they want, but not to do anything else. Or teacher and students may meet in small groups to discuss literature the students have chosen from among that provided by the teacher. As the culmination of a unit of study, the teacher may expect every student to work on some project that will demonstrate understanding of what the class has been studying, yet the teacher may offer students several alternatives—including the option to design their own project. The teacher and students may together brainstorm possible topics for study; in a significant sense, they are **negotiating the curriculum**. Or, the teacher may determine a broad topic (e.g., the future) and guide students in brainstorming subtopics and finally in deciding upon a specific topic they would like to pursue individually or in a small group. In whole language classrooms, students frequently have the opportunity to choose an activity that has meaning for them, and then to determine when, where, and with whom they will carry out that activity. Such choice encourages students to **take ownership of their work and responsibility for it.**

**7. Students are treated as capable and developing, not as incapable and deficient.** Whole language teachers resist imposing arbitrary standards and timetables on children. They know from experience that the testing undertaken by school psychologists often finds weaknesses that scarcely exist, if at all, when a child is engaged in authentic learning activities rather than the artificial kinds of activities encountered in the tests. They know that standardized academic tests are too limited to reveal children's actual accomplishments and growth. And they know that it is unreasonable to expect children to develop in the same ways or to learn exactly the same things at the same time. Therefore, whole language teachers do not give students repeated batteries of tests to determine deficiencies in isolated skills, nor do they constantly try to ferret out and criticize their students' weaknesses. Rather, they notice and praise children's strengths and their developing competence as learners and literate individuals. With inexperienced readers and writers, for example, they do not expect "correct" word identification in reading or conventional spelling in writing from the very outset, but appreciate and respond positively to children's increasingly sophisticated control of these communicative processes. In whole language classrooms, all students are treated as capable and developing, including those with limited proficiency in English, those considered "at-risk," and those labeled as having learning disabilities and "special needs." Thus, while virtually all students flourish in a whole language environment, it should not be surprising that the students who seem to grow most phenomenally are those traditionally considered deficient or likely not to succeed.

**8. Assessment is continuous, intertwined with learning and teaching.** In whole language classrooms, assessment relies heavily on teacher's daily observations. When observations are recorded frequently, they provide powerful documentation of students' growth and accomplishments. Student self-evaluation is also crucial in whole language classrooms. Portfolios containing periodic samples of students' writing, reading and other work; records of conferences and interviews; inventories and questionnaires; dialogue journals and learning logs are major sources of information about students' growth. Such records preserve data for both teacher evaluation and student self-evaluation. Whole language teachers know that, taken together, several such means are far more valid indicators of student progress than standardized tests.

For further information:

Edelsky, C., Altwerger, B., & Flores, B. (1991). Whole language: What's the difference? Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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# How Whole Language Teachers Develop Phonics "Know How"

In primary classrooms, whole language teachers help children develop the phonics "know how" they need for reading in many ways. Some of these are:

1. By **immersing** children in literature and other print, including rhymes, songs, and stories in which various sound elements are prominent (alliteration and rhyme, especially). While teachers read and reread big books, charts, and posters to the children, they use their hand or a pointer to show the correlation between their spoken words and the written words. This helps children develop a sight vocabulary and begin to develop an awareness of the system of letter/sound relationships—that is, phonics know-how.

2. By **discussing** with children some of the prominent sound features in the stories and songs and poems they're reading. This provides explicit help in reinforcing the most important letter/sound relationships and patterns. Usually teachers will devote particular attention to consonants at the beginnings of words and to rhyming patterns involving the middles and ends of words, since these seem most crucial for identifying words.

3. By **demonstrating** the connection between spoken sounds and the written letters that represent them. Teachers may do this when modeling their own composing process for children; they may, for instance, call attention to initial consonants as they write on the chalkboard. Similarly, teachers may call attention to letter/sound features as they write what children have dictated. Or they may work with individuals or small groups of children to help them write the letters for the sounds they want to represent in words, as the children begin using phonemic spelling in their early efforts to express themselves and to communicate with others.

4. By **encouraging children to explore letter/sound relationships**. After reading a poem, for instance, with a lot of words that begin with "sl" and "sp," children may list other "sl" and "sp" words. Poems or stories with rhyming patterns—such as the Dr. Seuss books—may stimulate children to make lists of words that rhyme.

5. By **providing tape recordings of books, poems, and songs** wherein sound elements provide part of the literary appeal, and encouraging children to repeatedly listen to the tapes as they follow along with the printed material.

6. By **encouraging development from pre-phonemic to phonemic spelling** in the children's independent writing. Whole language teachers may accomplish this by commenting upon letter/sound relationships as they themselves write in front of the children; by helping children write letters for the sounds they want to represent in words; by pairing pre-phonemic spellers with children who are already phonemic spellers and by encouraging them to work together to spell as they write; and of course, by all the other means that promote phonemic awareness.

7. By **helping children use letter/sound cues as they read**. While children are in the process of reading a text, teachers can guide them in using letter/sound cues along with context, meaning, and their prior knowledge in order to read more effectively.

8. By **attempting to determine what strategies the children themselves are using** to learn letter/sound relationships and recurring patterns, and encouraging the use of these strategies.

Whatever the particular teaching strategy, whole language teachers focus on the development of phonics know-how within the context of students' interests and communicative needs at that moment. While focusing on meaning, the teacher helps children deal with and grasp letter/sound relationships as they read and appreciate a text, and as they write to express themselves and to communicate with others. In this sense, instruction moves from whole to part and back to the whole.

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# Research in Support of Whole Language

In the last thirty years we have learned a great deal about language, literacy, learning, and teaching. All across the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, teachers are changing their classrooms and their instructional programs to fit this new knowledge. They are taking recent research on teaching/learning processes, adding their knowledge of particular children in their classrooms, and making curricular decisions which support rather than interfere with children's reading, writing, and learning. Many of the teachers who are bridging this gap between theory and practice call themselves whole language teachers.

Whole language teachers are knowledgeable practitioners. They have read and discussed the research and theory that informs their teaching. On their own initiative, often after they have been teaching for some time, they have begun to read about how children learn to talk and to read and write and about how teachers and others have helped children do so. They have become experts in the field of literacy education—experts who know about language and learning and teaching not only from books, but also from life in their classrooms.

The work of these professionals is supported by two research bases:

1. **Theoretical research in education, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics**. (A list of this work appears in an annotated bibliography prepared by Rhodes and Shanklin [1989] and a book by Heald-Taylor [1989].)

2. **Research on the teaching and learning in whole language classrooms conducted by whole language teachers and other educators**. This research base is extensive and has been reported in a number of books and journals. Whole language classrooms have also been the focus of several dissertations and master's degree research projects. Thirty-eight of these studies are annotated in a research bibliography by Stephens (1991). The studies provide ample evidence that the children in such classrooms grow as readers, writers and learners. These studies fall roughly into three categories, as follows:

**Studies of individual children over time.** One example of studies in this category is by Susan Church and Judith Newman who document the progress of Danny, a ninth grader with a history of reading difficulties . He participated in a whole language reading program and, at the end of the year, used more productive strategies as he read, took more risks in reading, and was more interested in reading. He also passed all his classes. (See Rhodes and Shanklin for a summary and for the full citation for this study. The bibliographies by Stephens and by Rhodes and Shanklin cite several other examples.)

**Studies of entire classrooms of children.** A study by JoBeth Allen provides an example here. Allen discusses research conducted by teachers on the literacy development of children in their whole language kindergarten classrooms. Their results suggest that nearly all the children made significant progress as readers and writers over the course of the year. Allen's study is annotated in the bibliography by Stephens. Similar results are reported in other studies cited by Stephens and by Shanklin and Rhodes.

**Studies comparing whole language classrooms with more traditional instruction.** H. Ribowsky's study compared a code emphasis with whole language, and concluded that "a whole language approach was more effective than a code emphasis approach in fostering emergent literacy." Penny Freppon studied 24 children, 12 from literature-based/whole language classrooms and 12 from skills-based classrooms. She found significant differences between the two groups of children. In addition, the children seemed to have different ideas about reading and these ideas seemed to be related to the type of instruction they received. For example, children in the whole language classrooms said they were good readers because they read a lot of books; children in the skills group said they were good readers because they knew a lot of words. Freppon also noted that children in the whole language classrooms used a "balanced cuing system (while reading) which meant they used meaning, structure, and visual cues." The skills group "attempted to sound out words more than twice as often as did the literature group," but the literature group was more successful in doing so (success rates of 32% and 53% respectively), apparently because the literature group more effectively used context and prior knowledge along with letter/sound cues. P. Haggerty, E. Hiebert and M. Owens studied children in second, fourth, and sixth grade literature-based/whole language class-

rooms and compared their progress with children receiving traditional skills-based instruction. They analyzed comprehension and writing test data and they interviewed children about their concepts of reading, the strategies they see themselves using, and their concepts of themselves as readers. They also observed in the classrooms. Their results suggest that "students in the literature-based classrooms outperformed those in skills-oriented classrooms." In the literature-based classrooms, not only were test scores higher, but children's perceptions about literacy "shifted to emphasize the meaningful nature of reading and writing."

These studies provide detailed glimpses of the learning of children in whole language classrooms. In so doing, they support what whole language teachers across the country have seen first-hand. That is, when learning in school builds on what is known about learning outside of school, children become active, involved readers and writers who not only know how to read and write, but who choose to do so.

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# Whole Language is as American as Apple Pie

In 1797 when Thomas Jefferson addressed The Virginia Congress concerning public education, he stated:

*"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and will never be. Therefore, I propose schooling in reading and writing, arithmetic, and history at common expense to all."*

In this statement, Jefferson tells us that literacy and a sense of our place in time are our best protection against tyranny of all sorts. Of course, his obvious reference was to the political tyranny of governments. However, with his mention of civilization and history, he implies that literacy can help us defend ourselves against the tyranny of a singularity of beliefs, ideas, and ways of living. As Jefferson intended, literacy would enable us to question as well as to understand the rules and regulations which confront us as laws and ideas and opinions which come to us as facts. In short, Jefferson's vision of literacy would afford us the freedom to be active and equal citizens capable of asserting our right to be different types of Americans—and all of this would take place in public schools where everyone could benefit.

As an educational philosophy and a theoretical framework, whole language seeks to make Jefferson's vision a reality in our schools. Accordingly, from the beginning of schooling, teachers with a whole language way of thinking about education and about literacy try to get students to do the kind of reading and writing in school that people do outside of school in their everyday lives. Students read books and newspapers for information and pleasure; they write notes to friends and to themselves and letters to inquire; they sing and write songs and poetry to build community spirit among classmates; and they write stories and articles about the world around them. In groups and as individuals, students analyze these literacy events and the texts they produce in order to assess their own literate abilities and products, to clarify their own intentions and interpretations, and to develop their awareness of reading and writing processes.

Working collaboratively, they learn to question their own and other authors' motives for writing, to project the possible social consequences of varied interpretations of and intentions for texts, and to value the differences in beliefs, language, and experiences that their classmates bring to their discussions and to the texts they read and write. Because students work together so often, they must develop relationships of responsibility in order to ensure that their differences are not lost or devalued. These democratic relationships prepare students to work and live cooperatively in and out of school.

In whole language classrooms, teachers are working to make this Jeffersonian vision of literacy come alive, just as legislators and other citizens work to realize other facets of Jefferson's challenge to America. We cannot hope to live free of the tyranny of government and a singularity of ideas if we do not develop our students' literacy or if we ourselves stay ignorant about literacy.

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# Reading in Whole Language Classrooms: Focus on Comprehension

Whole language is a way of thinking about education. It is based on certain values about how best to live in a democratic society and certain research about what language is and how it is learned. While whole language is about much more than teaching reading (it concerns itself with all aspects of the curriculum), it certainly concerns itself with reading. If your child is in a whole language classroom, you know how important reading is in your child's school day.

In a whole language classroom, reading is a matter of comprehending—of making sense of and with print. What whole language teachers do is try to get your child and others in touch with the real process of reading. Instead of talking about reading or working on a variety of skills that are supposed to represent what proficient readers do, children in whole language programs are invited, right from the start, to live the life of a proficient reader and do what proficient readers really do: read and discuss books.

Such an invitation may seem impossible at first hearing. After all, how can young children read books before they can read?! The answer is: the same way they talk before they can talk. That is, from the very beginning, babies and toddlers do the best they can with what they've got, and others around them help them by giving them literally millions of inadvertant talking "lessons." These are not explicit lessons; the parents or older brothers or sisters don't realize, in fact, that they are offering lessons at all. Instead, the lessons or demonstrations are simply a by-product of people talking with and in front of the toddler. These incidental lessons cover every aspect of talking: just how much air to blow out to make the first sound in "papa," how loud to talk, what names go with what things, how to talk about the past, how to ask a question, how to show respect or anger or love through talk, and so on. The toddler learns to talk through participating actively (flawed though that participation may be by adult standards) in conversations with others who talk with the toddler, showing the toddler how language works and what it's for.

It is the same with reading. Through actively using whatever they know about written language children learn to read. That is, learning to read (and write) takes place as children read (and write) the best they can, right from the start, with others who read (and write) with them and in front of them. The others around them give them crucial but inadvertant "lessons" about reading: that adults use those marks, that those marks mean something, that those marks are powerful (they cause drivers to stop cars, they let people know where to get hamburgers and french fries, they make people laugh or cry when they open certain envelopes), that letters to grandma start one way and stories start another, that some print has accompanying pictures and some does not, that some written language sounds more like talk (phone messages) and some sounds different (Bible stories). These are crucial, basic lessons. Unless they are learned, none of the "smaller" lessons (like how to form an "a" or how to spell "cat" or how to pronounce "Penelope") will do much to help someone read.

Those crucial, basic lessons about meaning, purpose, genre conventions, and so on—the lessons that are so central if someone is going to be able to make sense of print (to be able to comprehend, to be able to read)—are taught through demonstration rather than through explicit teaching. Certain "smaller," more localized pieces of information about print, like how to form certain letters or why there are spaces between words or what those dots (periods) are, may be taught explicitly to children, but to be integrated most fully into children's ability to use written language, this information is best offered not separately, but "in the middle," as children are in the act of actual reading or writing or when children ask for such lessons themselves.

The reason good literature and literature discussion groups are so important in whole language classrooms is that they offer children a way to do what proficient readers do. Proficient readers do not spend their time reading textbooks written to teach reading, even if those textbooks contain quality selections from children's literature (as the new basal series do). There is a lot of difference between reading only one chapter (followed by questions and worksheets) of a good children's book like Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan and reading the entire book. The meanings children can make of that one chapter are affected by surrounding chapters. Meanings accumulate throughout an entire text; the beginning frames the end but the middle and the end also illuminate the beginning.

And when proficient readers finish a book they do not do a series of exercises to hone their skills; they talk with others about the book. That talk lets them hear others' interpretations, others' strategies in reading, others' approaches to reading. That talk expands their own horizons as readers. Your child's whole language teacher knows

that if your child and others have such experiences, they too will become better readers with broader reading horizons.

On the other hand, your child may be in a reading program that is not actually a whole language program. Be wary of labels. Just because your school says it is whole language doesn't mean it is. The only way you can tell is by observing on several occasions the kinds and qualities of interactions children are having with and about written language. You should see a classroom with a wide variety of printed material (most of which has not been written for the express purpose of teaching children to read)—children's literature, reference materials, menus for local restaurants, adult newspapers, catalogues and order blanks, and so on. You should see those materials being used for some purpose other than doing exercises with print: for sheer entertainment, for answering questions of fact and for comparing the "facts" in different reference materials, for playing restaurant in the dress-up corner, for keeping track of what positions are taken on certain issues by those who write letters to the editor, for ordering films for the class. You should notice many opportunities for children to choose what they will read and why they will read, few occasions when everyone reads from the same text, and fewer still where there is no demand at all for reading. You should see a focus on making sense; i.e., a focus on comprehension. You should see situations in which it is expected that different children will have different interpretations of the same text and situations in which children will be expected to talk at length about what led to their particular interpretations. You should see the teacher treating children's "errors" in reading as sensible, giving the child credit for having a strategy even while pointing out that that strategy is non-productive in that particular case. You should see the teacher responding to children's problems with print by prompting them to focus more often on comprehending ("What would make sense there?" "What picture are you getting in your mind?" "What do you think the author means here?") than on decoding ("What does it start with?" "How does it end?"), though such cues could follow attention to cues about meaning. And above all, you should see a classroom full of children who love to read.

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# What About Skills in Whole Language Classrooms?

In whole language classrooms, students typically learn needed literacy skills in the context of interest, need, and use—that is, when they have a practical reason for learning them. For example:

- A young child learns his address in the context of pretend play about being a fix-it man who has to write down the address of his customers.
- Another young child learns to use letters that closely represent the sounds of the words she writes when she begins writing to a pen-pal outside the classroom—a distant audience that cannot readily ask for a translation of what she has written.
- Primary grade children learn concepts like "word," "letter," "sound," and the concept of letters representing sounds, while enjoying and discussing predictable literature.
- While reading storybooks to her dolls, another young child accustomed to reading the remembered story, teaches herself to use phonics along with context to get the actual words of the text.
- Children with limited proficiency in English gain greater facility with English as they exchange written messages with classmates who speak English as their first language, as well as by hearing literature read aloud to them and by participating in daily classroom activities.
- When they find that classmates have difficulty reading the stories they've written, young writers learn to write more legibly, use more consistent spacing, punctuate sentences, and spell more conventionally.
- When they want to write a letter to the school principal protesting a school policy, students learn to support their argument with details.
- When they need to locate fiction and nonfiction books relating to preserving the environment, a group of fourth graders learns to use the table of contents and the index.
- In trying to locate professionals who might speak to them about issues like drug and child abuse, a group of fourth graders learns to use the yellow pages of the phone book.
- Children learn to draw inferences and to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate as they read and discuss interesting literature. The ability to identify main ideas, causes and effects, and other comprehension skills develops through such discussions.
- In a university teacher education class, a native speaker of Spanish increases her grasp of English grammar by reading a lot and by writing in her journal, while being encouraged not to worry about the finer points of English grammar as she writes.

Of course, students do not necessarily learn needed skills without help from their teacher or their peers. But in whole language classrooms, reading and writing skills are not taught in isolation, through worksheets and workbooks or through exercises and drills. Observant and informed teachers know that such isolated skills work is not only tedious but relatively inefficient and ineffective. Skills that are taught, practiced, and tested in isolation do not necessarily transfer well to authentic reading and writing situations. Therefore, whole language teachers mostly teach literacy skills when students need them, aiming for learning for immediate use and, in the bargain, gaining a greater likelihood for later transfer to use outside the classroom.

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# Whole Language and the Theological Concerns and Beliefs of Parents

Whole language educators—perhaps better than others—recognize the important literacy learning that takes place at home before a child ever comes to school. They know that parents teach their children with each story read and talked about and with each occasion that the child observes the parents reading and writing. In fact, whole language classroom experiences often imitate some of the literacy learning experiences that take place in many homes.

Often, parents recall their own school days and assume that their children need the same experiences they once had. However, just as parents would seldom want to limit their children to the medical treatments available twenty-five years ago, they also might want to reconsider whether the teaching methods of an earlier generation are good enough for their own children today. In the earliest days of our country's history, those who could sign their names were considered literate. As we all know, today's definition of literacy encompasses infinitely more. When today's children become adults and face the challenges of earning a living, they will need, more than any generation before them, the kinds of experiences that whole language classrooms can provide.

Today's children need the chance to learn to be active readers, not just passively looking at words on a page but thinking actively throughout the process about how the new information fits with what they already know. They need to express in writing what they know and want to communicate. They need to use writing to help sort out their thoughts and to solve problems. They need the confidence to speak so that others will want to listen; they need the ability to listen carefully enough so that others will want to speak. Whole language classrooms provide the learning environment for these literacy learning experiences so that today's students will be ready to meet tomorrow's challenges.

Unfortunately, some parents (most often those who embrace fundamentalist Christian beliefs coupled with a Far Right political agenda) have been told that they should resist the kinds of activities and materials commonly a part of whole language classrooms. They have been warned that if they aren't careful, today's classrooms might turn their children against their home and church values.

Some parents have been told that the terms "whole" or "holistic" imply a belief in a single world government and religion. Extremist parents who believe their own religion is the only true religion are suspicious, therefore, of "whole" language classrooms. When their children's teachers include literature written about and by those from other cultures, these same parents worry that a one-world, one-religion conspiracy might indeed be at work. Parents can be assured, however, that the "whole" in whole language is not tied to a New Age movement. They can also be assured that whole language is not a religion nor is it linked to a religion. The "whole" label refers to language learning that occurs best when it is in an authentic context—a context in which sounds, sentence structure, word meanings, and a situation all occur together, i.e., as a whole. Whole language teachers affirm the uniqueness of each student and his or her cultural or religious perspective. When teachers teach about other cultures, when they use literature from many cultures, they are not advocating cultural, political, or religious revolution. They are not promoting a religious ideology. In today's world of interdependent nations and cultures, they are permitting children to at least look at a little bit of the world's variety.

Some parents have been told to resist student-centered, whole language classrooms, where teachers speak of wanting to "empower" their students. These parents fear that their children will come to rely on self rather than on God. Parents should remind themselves that their children's teachers personally hold varying beliefs about human nature and about God. Moreover, two things are clear here: (1) Whole language teachers are not trying to unseat beliefs about God; and (2) while whole language teachers respect the perspective of God-fearing fundamentalists who believe in human inadequacy, they create classrooms that encourage what children genuinely <u>can</u> do. As they establish classroom learning communities, they respect the best self that each child brings into the classroom, building on the child's abilities and knowledge, nudging the student to become independent and joyfully literate.

Some parents have been told to resist the expressive writing that is encouraged in whole language classrooms. They're told that personal journals and autobiographical assignments are an invasion of student and family privacy. Parents should, of course, expect that their children's individual and family privacy will be safeguarded. But they should also realize that reflective writing plays an important part in learning, and that their children's teachers will insist that students have the opportunity to give voice to their thoughts and to use writing to think and to learn.

Some parents have been told to reject whole language practices in which the teacher does not always correct the young reader who reads "horse" for "colt" or the young writer who writes "ecsploring" for "exploring." Parents who read the Bible literally place a high priority on precise word identification and thus are understandably uncomfortable with teachers letting "errors" go uncorrected. But parents know from experience that error is a natural part of learning situations. When a child learns to ride a bike, for example, there are always a number of failed attempts or "errors" that occur on the way to success. Moreover, most parents believe that even when reading the Bible, individual readers discover individual meanings of texts that speak to their individual needs. This is not to say that all personal

interpretations of any text are equally valid; some readings are clearly contradicted by the texts themselves. However, it does mean that personal interpretations will depend on the background that a child brings to the reading. Young readers and writers must be given the chance to take risks with reading and writing in order to succeed and to grow intellectually.

Some parents have been told to fear some of the literature being included in whole language classrooms. They have been encouraged to watch out for texts that might include hidden symbolism, and they have been warned that some materials and classroom activities produce Satanic influences on children's imaginations. Parents should, of course, expect whole language teachers to choose carefully and responsibly the literature provided for young readers. They should expect teachers not to use books and activities that actually promote belief in the occult. However, parents can recognize that any reading of fiction involves using the imagination. They will recognize that whole language teachers must seek and use materials and activities that capture children's imaginations—that are personally engaging—since they know that these will provide the spark for learning.

Whole language teachers will tell you that they learn as much as they teach. They encourage parents to stay involved in their children's learning and teaching as well. They encourage parents to visit their children's classrooms so that they can witness for themselves whole language at work, and they encourage parents to extend and enrich their children's literacy learning experiences at home.

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# Phonics Phacts

"For too long, we have been unwilling to deal with the root cause of the problem of illiteracy in America: the flawed methods we have used to teach our children to read. Research shows phonics is the most effective way to teach people to read. It's the way most of us learned to read. But it fell out of use in the last 20 years, with disastrous consequences."

This definitive statement comes not from an educator or a researcher but from Senator William Armstrong of Colorado speaking on the floor of the United States Senate. It's an example of how simple solutions to complex problems often involve confusion of issues, misinformation, and logical fallacies about cause and effect. When they get tangled in politics, it makes it even harder to sort out the facts.

Senator Armstrong has a lot of the history wrong here. Most of us were not taught to read through a method called phonics. We were taught to read with basal readers which were based on controlled vocabulary and "word attack skills", including considerable attention to phonics. In fact, there never was a period when most learners were taught exclusively with a "phonics" method. Although there have been variations in reading instruction in this country during this century, there was no sharp pervasive change 20 years ago in the way reading was taught. Since the early 1930s, basal readers have dominated American reading instruction. There is no evidence of any "disastrous consequences" to literacy beginning 20 years ago. In the 1970s, with a strong back-to-basics movement, basals increased rather than decreased time devoted to explicit instruction in phonics. In the last decade there has been a definite shift away from basals and toward the use of children's literature in reading programs. And basals have responded by including more actual literature which is less heavily edited. With the shift toward earlier experience in whole language programs with real literature, sales of children's books have increased 500% in the last 10 years and use of children's rooms in libraries is up dramatically. A lot of children are reading a lot more. What is the role of phonics here? What IS phonics? What role does it play in learning to read? Why is phonics NOT a method of teaching reading nor a solution to the literacy problems of the world?

**What is Phonics?**

English, together with many other European languages, is written with the Roman alphabet. Each of the languages that use this alphabet modifies it to fit the particular nature of that language. Spanish and French use accent marks over vowels, for example. Scandinavian languages add some vowel letters. English uses some letter combinations—*th, sh, ch, ph*—to represent single sounds.

In alphabetic writing, the letters and patterns of letters relate to meaning as well as to the sounds and sound patterns of the oral language. **Phonics** is a term that is only appropriate to use with an alphabetically written language because it refers to the system of relationships between the sound system and the writing system. Phonics is not the relationship between letters and sounds, but the relationships between systems. The relationships are much more complicated than letters to sounds.

Sometimes, it may seem like the relationship is between letters and sounds. In writing the word *man*, for example, the letters *m, a,* and *n* each relate to a sound of the oral word. But consider the word *mane*. The change in vowel sounds from *man* to *mane* involves the addition of an extra letter as a marker. The writing system uses the *vowel-consonant-E* pattern to differentiate two sets of English vowels. So we have *pan/pane, can/cane, van/vane*. There is another pattern in spelling that contrasts *man/main, pan/pain, ran/rain*. This illustrates that phonics really involves relating patterns to patterns, not individual sounds to individual letters.

But now consider others words, *main* and *Maine*, which sound the same as *mane* ; they are homophones. All languages—not just English—have homophones, words that mean different things but sound the same. Having different spellings for words that sound the same may help a bit in reading. For writing, however, one must remember which *which/witch* is *which*, which *pair/pear/pare* is the fruit. And, of course, words which sound different may be homographs, sharing the same spelling. *Read/read, lead/lead*, and *desert/desert* are examples.

English tends to have such complexities because of the multiple language roots that contributed to the language. The letter *N* seems to be a stable spelling of the last sound in *man*. But from our Danish roots we get *kn* as in *know, knew, knee, knight, knife*, etc. From our Greek roots we get *gnaw, gnat, gneiss*. We also get the *pn* spelling in *pneumonia* and *pneumatic*. A variant of the n sound can be spelled *gn at the ends of words*, as in *campaign, reign*, and *sign/resign/design*. That comes from our French roots.

But notice that when *sign* becomes *signal*, the *g* and *n* represent separate sounds. That happens also with *designate*. But if the affixes are grammatical, like *s, ed*, or *ing*, there is no *g* sound: *signs, signed, signing*.

Here's another problem with our *n* sound spellings. That sound is what linguists call a nasal. It kind of goes up our noses. In many dialects of English, it all but disappears up our noses before certain consonants, particularly *t* and *d*. Examples are *want, went, band, bend*. The spelling keeps the *n* even though the sound is hardly heard.

This is not a unique complexity. A unit like *man* may represent a different sound pattern depending on the word it is a part of (for example *manic* and *maniac*). In oral language, sounds change in regular ways depending on other sounds following them. That's partly because of where the mouth parts are for each sound; as tongue, lips, teeth, vocal chords change position, they change the sounds. The spelling, however, often does not change. An example is *site*. Add an affix and that becomes *situate*. The *t* of *site* is still there but the sound is not *t* but *ch*. When *situate* becomes *situation*, the second *t* stays in the spelling but the sound goes from *t* to *sh*. By keeping the spelling, we preserve the meaning relationship which would be lost if we kept the phonic relationship constant.

Add one more common complexity of English phonics. Several hundred years ago, the sound of all unaccented vowels shifted to a common sound, usually called *schwa* by language scholars. So the vowel in the unaccented second syllable of *woodsman* is not the vowel in *man* but a schwa. Function words like *to, can, was, were, and, or* are usually unaccented. That means that at least the second most common sound of any vowel is this very common sound. Think of the sounds of the vowels in this sentence: *Can* I have *a* ticket *to* the game? Five of the vowels shift to the schwa in ordinary usage.

By now you may be thinking, "if phonics is so complicated, how come people can read at all?" The answer is that people don't depend on phonics to read. In meaningful language contexts it is easy for a reader to sort out the complexity because the meaning and the grammar, or language structure, clarify the phonics complexities. Here are some examples:

The *main* feature of the *male* lion is his *red mane*. I *read* about that in a book I got in the *mail* last week. I like to *read* such books. In this sequence, telling *red* from *read* or the past tense from the present tense of *read* is no problem. The context makes it clear.

Readers never rely solely on phonic relationships as they read. Their preoccupation is with meaning, as it should be. They predict what will be in the text and only need a little of the phonic information to make sense of the whole. So they are rarely stopped while they figure out what a word might be from its spelling. They have plenty of other cues to tell them what the meaning must be and what part of speech they need. Furthermore, the way we eventually learn the alternate spellings of homophones is through our reading.

**Phonics as Method**

That gets us to the issue of phonics as a method of teaching reading. A common sense notion is that if someone trying to learn to read just learns to match letters and sounds they can read. That leads to the simplistic conclusion that if they don't learn it is because they haven't been taught phonics. This simplistic reasoning then leads to the notion that since all this is so obvious, there must be a conspiracy to keep people from being taught this sure, simple way. But the phonic relationships are anything but simple. Furthermore, these relationships are abstract: phonics isn't about the relationship of print and sound; it's about the relationship of abstract systems.

What we've learned from the study of language development, both oral and written, is that language is easy to learn when it is used functionally in the real world to make sense. Little children understand and make themselves understood in oral language long before they fully control the sound system. That's because they learn language in the context of its use. Children learn written language in the same way. They may learn the names of letters and even have some sense of how they relate to sounds as they're learning to read. But they can only learn the abstract phonics system in the context of trying to make sense of meaningful print. They are very good at learning language in meaningful contexts. They are not very good at learning abstractions out of context. Current research shows very young children becoming aware of the alphabetic nature of written English. They invent spellings as they experiment with writing and are able to test out their own developing phonics rules. These invented phonics rules often show how keenly these young learners discriminate sounds. They hear features adults have learned to ignore. Gradually, young learners also tune out features which are not important in the system. Direct instruction in phonological rules is not what helps babies learn to talk; direct instruction in phonics is not what helps people learn the complex system of phonics relationships.

Phonics is an important part of reading alphabetically written language. But it is only a part. How do you say *going to*? Try it in: I'm *going to* the store. Now try it in: I'm *going to* go home now. Most of us say something like *gonna* in the second case. But we don't say it that way in the first sentence. That's because the words have different grammatical functions in the two sentences. We can't pronounce it until we decide, intuitively, what its grammar is.

**How Much Phonics?**

Phonics is an important part of reading English, but when we make it into a method of teaching reading, we're making these mistakes:

1. We're turning reading from a process of making sense to one of saying sounds for letters.
2. We're ignoring what kids already know about how to make sense of print.
3. We're ignoring the meaning and structure of the language. That means we are distorting the phonics by taking it out of the language context.
4. We're beginning with abstractions instead of functional meaningful language which is easy to learn.
5. We're confusing speakers of different dialects who, therefore, have different sound systems.
6. We're postponing the payoff: the joy of getting the story or the message of the print.

If we support our pupils in developing their phonic generalizations while they are learning to make sense of print, then we avoid these mistakes. In Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Carroll said it well: "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves."

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# Phonics and Dialects of English

All English speakers speak and understand at least one dialect, or variant form, of English. In the United States, for historical reasons, there are three major dialects spoken in areas that stretch from East to West. These are called Northern, Midland, and Southern. But there are some more contained dialects as well, mostly in the Eastern areas settled first: Downeast Maine, Boston, New York City, Jersey City, Tidewater Virginia, Sea Islands Gullah (Carolina and Georgia), Appalachian, Cajun, New Orleans (to name a few). And, of course, England, Canada, Australia and other English speaking countries also have regional dialects.

The dialect patterns in the US are complicated because as industry developed in Northern cities, people brought regional dialects with them as they came seeking jobs. And in many parts of the country, class and ethnic differences as well as immigrant language influences are also reflected in dialect differences.

There was a time when spelling was not conventional across dialects; people invented their own spellings to represent the way they thought their own speech sounded. But as printing became widespread, spelling became standard across dialects. English is somewhat unusual in that a group of American intellectuals, including Noah Webster, deliberately rejected some British spellings in order to make American literature easily recognized. Some examples are *labour, jewellery, centre*. Now, there is standard American spelling and standard British.

The problem different dialects presents for phonics is this: there is a single spelling across dialects that pronounce words very differently. In Northern dialects there are double consonants at the end of *test, breakfast*, and *desk*. In Southern speech these are pronounced *tes', breakfas', des'*. There is an *l* sound in *help* in the North, none in the South (*he'p*). But in midland dialects, *help* has two syllables, *hey-ulp*. There are at least four ways of saying *almond*, two with and two without the *l*. In certain dialects an *r* sound is added to words ending in vowels (*idea, Cuba, media*) but not produced in words that already have an ending *r* (*car, dear, meteor*).

Vowels vary considerably from dialect to dialect. Which of these words have the same vowel for you: *frog, fog, bog, cog, dog, hog, smog, grog, log, clog, tog*. In some English dialects the vowels are all the same. In others there are two vowels; one in *frog, fog, dog, hog, log* and the other in *bog, cog, smog, clog, tog*. Where does your list break? None of these are right or wrong. It's just a dialect difference.

Each of us develops phonics rules that fit the speech sounds of our own dialects. That doesn't have to be a problem unless the school insists there is a single set of phonics rules for all American speakers. Unfortunately, people who speak lower class dialects and regionally transplanted people of all classes are the ones who will suffer most from this insistence. They will be confused by being taught that letter patterns represent sound patterns that are foreign to their ears. The worst problems will come if teachers try to change the speech of their pupils to fit the phonics rules. One common English spelling is the *gh* in words like *fight, eight, light, might, night, right, sight, tight*. That seems to be a holdover from Scottish and other United Kingdom dialects which do, in fact, have a throaty *h* found in other Germanic languages but not usually in English. But it would confuse most Americans if our teachers insisted they must say *likht* because the word is spelled *light*. In just the same way, it confuses many American children when they are told they must produce an *l* in *help, almond*, or *palm*.

The pretense of a single set of phonics rules is not only confusing; it damages people's chances for school success. Most standardized reading tests have a section on phonics that asks students to match rhyming words or to identify words with similar sounds. The problem is that what rhymes in one dialect doesn't in another (*aunts* rhymes with *wants* in some dialects, with *pants* in others). Homophones (*marry, Mary, merry*) in one dialect sound different in others. Such phonics test items are obviously biased against speakers whose dialects don't match the dialect of the person who wrote the test. And at a time when test results have increasingly high stakes, such a phonics bias can have severe consequences for just the children who are less likely to succeed in school.

Even if children were not tested with biased phonics items, however, it would still be damaging to subject children to instruction based on a single set of phonics rules. Phonics

is a complicated set of relationships between the sound system and the writing system. It includes a set of relationships among sounds (e.g., the way the middle vowel and the accented syllable in *telegraph* changes when the word becomes *telegraphy*). Phonics relationships are complicated by homophones (*pair, pear, pare*) and homographs (*read, read*), by the multiplicity of roots of English (Greek, German, Latin, Danish, French) and by the fact that our spelling system is based in part on sound, in part on meaning, and in part on grammar. Phonic relationships are learned best the way language is learned: through actually using the abstract system (the phonics system, in this case) in the context of trying to make sense of meaningful language (written language, in this case). Out-of-context, uninformed phonics instruction is not only confusing; it makes the learning of phonics harder. And when the rules being taught in out-of-context lessons do not match the learner's own dialect, it is that much more confusing and that much harder to learn. Yet another barrier for far too many children!

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# Phonics is a Flawed System

**Robert F. Carey**
**From: The Providence Journal-Bulletin**
**p. A-18, May 16, 1990**

A recent column by Joan Beck (April 24) is so thoroughly misguided and full of misinformation that some response is required. "Phonics," Mrs. Beck asserts, "is markedly, happily better than other approaches" to teaching reading. Further, this "has been known and thoroughly demonstrated for decades."

Such statements are patently false and reflect nothing as much as Joan Beck's ignorance of a large body of research and theory. She, like a number of other poorly informed observers of American public education (to which she refers as "an elephantine blob"), seems to equate good old straightforward phonics instruction with all that was once right about our schools. She blames our current crop of marginally literate high school graduates on the lack of instruction in letter-sound relationships (i.e., phonics) in the early grades.

This is complete nonsense.

In fact, a number of research studies suggest that the cause of at least some illiteracy has been an overemphasis on discredited, simple-minded approaches to reading instruction such as phonics. Phonics was not handed down from Mount Sinai as the eleventh commandment; it is a flawed system, of relatively recent origin, based on outmoded behaviorist views of human learning and inadequate theories of human language.

"The case for phonics is direct and obvious," according to Joan Beck. "English is fundamentally an alphabetical language."

Wrong again. The case for phonics is only apparently direct and superficially obvious. And a number of prominent linguists and psycholinguists might differ drastically in their opinions of what is fundamental about English.

One of the things that is direct and obvious about English is that it is semantic: Its function is to communicate meaning. The purpose of reading is to construct meaning, not to create a perfect spoken analog for the text. Phoneme-grapheme correspondence (matching sounds with symbols) is only one of several language systems we use when we read, and it is not the most important. Syntax, semantics, and pragmatics probably play a more central role in our meaningful encounters with text. Therefore, to emphasize phonics, often to the exclusion of these other systems, is to handicap the beginning reader with an unwarranted attention to the surface features of text.

It's clear, from what is called "miscue analysis" research, that children (and adults) who pay too much attention to "sounding out" are poorer at comprehending what they read than others who use all the language systems in concert. To do as Joan Beck suggests also requires the use of "regularized" texts in the early primary grades (e.g., "Dan can fan the man"). Clearly, these texts leave something to be desired in terms of plot and characterization. Besides, we know that kids respond well to functional tasks in classrooms. Sure, kids will go along with insipid instructional tasks in school materials, but their achievement soars when provided with authentic, real texts that are meaningful to them.

One of the claims often made by advocates of phonics approaches is that such programs are more effective in terms of measureable student achievement outcomes. More effective than what? Well, these days phonics is usually compared to what has come to be called a "whole language" approach to beginning reading instruction, in which children's literature and writing play a central role.

Consider this design: Take two groups of children, one phonics and one whole language. In the former group, the kids have received extensive phonics instruction and drill. In the latter, the kids have been encouraged to ask themselves, "Does that make sense to me?" and have used phonics as an ancillary tool.

Next, give both groups a standardized, norm-referenced reading test which always includes a significant "word attack" (phonics) section which looks suspiciously like the workbook pages the phonics group has encountered every day. The whole language group, of course, has not encountered workbook pages; they've been reading books. Which group is likely to do better on the test?

To be fair, there is no consensus in the reading research community about the value of phonics. But in some cases, phonics and "whole language" have been used as red herrings, or as code words to represent political attitudes toward public schools and teachers. But writers like Joan Beck should not be excused for failing to do their homework. Literacy is too important an issue to be dealt with in such a cavalier manner.

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# Why We Should Not Teach Intensive, Systematic Phonics

**1. It's not necessary.** Most children will unconsciously induce the common patterns, given ample opportunity to read environmental print and predictable materials, ample opportunity to write with invented spelling, some classroom attention to the sound elements in print, and other activities that foster the development of phonics knowledge.

**2. There are too many exceptions, especially for vowel patterns.** There are also too many exceptions to the rules. And even if a given rule applies to a word, it's not always possible to know which rule applies, unless you already know the word.

**3. Good readers use context first, phonics second.** Effective and efficient readers use context and their prior knowledge to narrow the possibilities of what would make sense. Often they then need only to sample the visual cues. If the word is in their listening vocabulary, context plus consonants are often enough. Even when the letters must be processed in more detail, phonics cues are likely to produce only an approximation of the word. Readers must also use context and prior knowledge to figure out the actual word itself.

**4. An emphasis on phonics restricts strategies for reading.** It encourages children to limit themselves to "sounding it out" as their first and possibly only conscious strategy for figuring out words and meaning, other than asking someone.

**5. Overemphasizing phonics may encourage readers to focus too much upon identifying words and too little upon making sense.**
No one reads to sound out words. We read to mean.

**6. It makes reading hard.** Teaching and testing numerous phonics patterns or rules may result in many children being labeled early as reading failures or slow readers since for many children it's harder to do phonics exercises than to learn to read. Success in phonics programs is NOT a prerequisite to learning to read.

**7. Contrary to what proponents of intensive, systematic phonics allege, research does not strongly support its teaching.** In comparison with the traditional reading programs in basals, intensive systematic phonics programs may produce slightly higher standardized test scores (especially on phonics sections) than these traditional programs, but any alleged advantage seems to disappear beyond the primary grades (Turner, 1989). In comparison with whole language programs, intensive systematic phonics is not necessarily more effective in producing higher standardized test scores, even in the early grades (e.g., Ribowsky, 1985). Most important, however, a growing body of research suggests that whole language classrooms, while producing similar scores on standardized tests, result in a much richer array of literate behaviors and attitudes (e.g., Stice and Bertrand, 1990). In these classrooms, phonics is not taught as an isolated subject; rather, phonics knowledge is developed as students are using written language for their own communicative purposes.

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# Phonics VERSUS Whole Language: Why Whole Language Teachers Don't Think It Is Much of a Debate

The media have helped promote the notion that when it comes to reading instruction it's phonics *versus* whole language. Presented this way, those who advocate phonics supposedly do not have children read whole texts, while, on the other hand, those who advocate whole language supposedly do not teach phonics.

Though some members of the Far Right do advocate phonics first, postponing the reading of any meaningful text until phonics has been mastered (or at least taught), this position is not taken by most educators. Among the community of reading educators and researchers, the issue is not whether phonics needs to be taught before or after engagement with real books; it is instead an issue of how phonics is learned and how it should be taught. One major position, expressed in Becoming a Nation of Readers, is that phonics needs to be taught systematically, explicitly, and perhaps intensively—though not extensively. This position assumes that reading is comprised of separate component skills (phonics skills among them) that add up to the act of reading. The other major position is that functional phonics knowledge can and should be developed more gradually, through various means that include a very different kind of direct teaching. This position assumes that reading is a whole, indivisible process in which several different cuing systems (phonics cues among them) are used simultaneously for making sense. The latter is a position held by whole language educators.

**What does the research say?**

Those who advocate systematic teaching of phonics point to research indicating that systematic and explicit instruction in phonics leads to higher reading achievement scores on standardized tests during the primary grades (typically, these tests have a section testing phonics skills in isolation.) They build their case primarily upon the research synthesized and analyzed by Chall in Learning to Read: The Great Debate (1967; updated 1983) and reiterated in such publications as Anderson et al.'s Becoming a Nation of Readers (1985) and Adams' Beginning to Read: Learning and Thinking about Print (1990), summarized by Lehr, Osborn, and Stahl. None of this research explicitly compares the development of phonics knowledge in systematic phonics classrooms with the development of phonics knowledge in whole language classrooms.

Critics of this research remind the educational community not only that much of this research is flawed (Carbo, 1989), but that even the best of the research does not indicate that teaching phonics intensively produces any advantages on standardized tests beyond the primary grades (Turner, 1989).

Whole language educators criticize this research specifically on the grounds that (1) standardized tests tell little (if anything) of what we really need to know about children's literacy development, and (2) much more broadly conceived research is needed for revealing what is learned in systematic phonics classrooms as contrasted with whole language classrooms. Notice the emphasis on "classrooms" rather than programs. Classrooms in which phonics is taught systematically usually differ from whole language classrooms in much more global ways. The former classrooms typically reflect a transmission, part-to-whole approach to teaching, with learners being relatively passive; the latter reflect a transactional whole-to-part approach, with learners taking a much more active role. In practice within the classroom, it is almost impossible to isolate program from perspective. That is, whole language and systematic phonics are each embedded in the overall perspectives they reflect.

Recently, some researchers have begun to compare systematic phonics with whole language, taking care to describe what allowed them to categorize the classrooms as "whole language." This research suggests not only that standardized test scores may not necessarily be lower for whole language students, but that indeed, whole language students get a much better start in developing the range of skilled behaviors and attitudes that characterize the literate adult.

One example is a study in which Ribowsky compared the effects of a code-emphasis approach with a whole language approach upon the emergent literacy of kindergartners. The code-emphasis students used a program with an intensive focus upon developing phonics knowledge, while the whole language students used the Shared Book Experience approach explained by Don Holdaway in Foundations of Literacy (1979). The whole language students did better than the code-emphasis students on tests of letter recognition and knowledge of consonant letter/sound relationships—the opposite of what might have been predicted, given the instructional focus of both programs. The whole language children also showed significantly greater growth in their concepts about print and various aspects of language and literacy.

Whole language children's greater progress toward literacy is illustrated even better, however, by studies in which a still wider range of assessment measures are used. A recent study by Stice and Bertrand involved fifty "at risk" first graders, five from each of five rural or urban whole language classrooms, and their matches from traditional skills classrooms in which phonics skills were taught explicitly, according to the basal reader program and the state-mandated skills requirements. When the children were compared over a two-year period on various quantitative and qualitative measures, the whole language children showed greater gains and better performance on virtually all measures. The differing responses to the reading and writing interview questions are especially interesting, leading Stice and Bertrand (1990) to these conclusions, among others: (1) the whole language students had a greater awareness of alternative strategies for dealing with reading problems; (2) they appeared more aware that the purpose of reading is to make meaning (rather than merely to call out the words); (3) they appeared to be developing greater independence in both reading and writing; and (4) they appeared to be more confident readers and writers.

Whole language educators see such research as beginning to document what they have already been observing informally in their classrooms: that whole language children do not seem to suffer in their functional

grasp of phonics, and that, in addition, they gain considerably more from a whole language approach than from more traditional instruction.

There seems to be every reason to think, then, that the phonics that children actually need can be developed, along with other literate strategies and attitudes, by: (1) immersing children in literature and other print; (2) discussing with children some of the prominent sound features in what they're reading; (3) demonstrating the relationship between spoken sounds and the written letters that represent them; (4) giving children opportunities to explore letter/sound relationships through activities the children themselves initiate or select; (5) providing children with opportunities to listen to tape recordings of various texts, and to follow the print as they listen; (6) helping children learn to write letters for the sounds they hear in words, as they learn to write; (7) helping children use letter/sound cues along with other cues as they read; and (8) supporting children in using their own strategies for grasping letter/sound relationships. Whole language teachers find that few children fail to develop a functional grasp of phonics through such means.

**Not phonics *versus* whole language, but phonics within whole language!**

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# Why a Whole Language Classroom May be the Best Place for Your Attention Deficit Disorder Hyperactive (ADHD) Student

The professional literature on the schooling of children labeled as ADHD (as well as those given other "severe" labels such as learning disabled) focuses almost exclusively on managing their behavior, using principles derived from behavioral psychology. Rarely do the professionals in this field consider alternative ways of educating such children. But whole language teaching can lessen the behavior problems. That is because whole language educators attempt to adjust the curriculum to meet the needs and interests of students instead of pressuring students to fit into a predetermined curriculum. It is also because the environment of whole language classrooms and whole language teachers' expectations for students make these teachers less likely to perceive some of the typical ADHD behaviors as seriously troublesome. The following are some of the ways that knowledgeable whole language teachers may promote the academic and social success of ADHD students of all ages and grade levels.

***1. Whole language teachers are particularly sensitive to the abilities and needs of their students, both collectively and individually.** They shape the curriculum with and in reponse to the students, instead of expecting the students to cope with a prepackaged curriculum. And they attempt to meet the needs of individual students.

***2. Whole language teachers emphasize all students' strengths.** Emphasizing strengths is especially important for ADHD students, since they are so often criticized for their shortcomings.

***3. Whole language teachers are alert for ways they can alleviate students' difficulties and work around their weaknesses.** For example, computers can help ADHD students complete their writing before attention fades and avoid the common ADHD problem of poor handwriting.

***4. Whole language teachers avoid worksheets, workbooks, and isolated skills work**—a particular blessing for ADHD students, who find it extraordinarily difficult to concentrate on such work.

***5. Whole language teachers provide many opportunities for students to choose learning experiences that are meaningful to them:** to choose what books to read, decide what to investigate, determine what to write. It is significantly easier for ADHD students to concentrate on tasks they find interesting and meaningful.

***6. Whole language teachers encourage students to think not only critically but creatively, and to engage in learning experiences that foster such independence of thought and expression.** This is especially important for ADHD students, who often tend to be creative and divergent thinkers.

***7. Whole language teachers allow and even encourage a significant degree of mobility in the classroom, as students confer with peers or move from one learning center to another.** They also tend to be tolerant of individual students' needs to "fiddle", move their feet, or sit or lie in unconventional positions. Whole language teachers may be especially likely to provide curricular activities that meet ADHD students' strong needs for moving and touching: hands-on science and math, creative drama, music and dance, along with art.

***8. Whole language teachers organize for collaborative learning.** Joint projects, discussion and conversation are valued aspects of a whole language classroom, another blessing for ADHD students. As students work with each other, whole language teachers can help ADHD students develop self-control and social skills, while helping other students respond more positively to ADHD students.

***9. Whole language teachers minimize the use of formal tests, but when they do administer them, they attempt to adjust to the needs of ADHD students as well as others.** Some ADHD students may work impulsively; they need help in slowing down, thinking about and checking their answers. Other ADHD students need extra time, even on standardized tests meant to be timed, because their difficulty in concentrating slows them down. Whole language teachers typically minimize the use of test scores in evaluating students, which is particularly important for ADHD students because they rarely are able to demonstrate their strengths on formal tests—standardized or otherwise.

***10. Whole language teachers tend to communicate frequently with parents, encouraging them to share their understanding of their child, work together for the child's success, and participate actively in facilitating classroom learning experiences.** Such close collaboration with parents can have particular benefits for the ADHD student.

In addition, there are several tactics teachers can use to help ADHD students whether or not they are whole language teachers.

***1. Help ADHD students (and others) develop strategies for minimizing the effects of emotion-controlled, impulsive behavior.** When a student is inclined to keep arguing with the teacher or with a peer, for example, the teacher can have both parties take "time out" to regain control of their emotions. This defuses the situation, but doesn't lay blame exclusively on the ADHD student.

***2. Avoid shaming or laying a guilt trip on ADHD students when they have behaved inappropriately.** Knowing that self-control is difficult and often impossible, teachers can remain sympathetic to the student, while rejecting the behavior. For the same reasons, they can ignore or avoid making an issue of minor disruptions.

***3.** To help ADHD students grasp instructions issued orally, teachers can: **(1) obtain eye contact with an ADHD student before giving instructions, or before repeating the instructions for the benefit of that student; (2) write instructions on the chalkboard and make sure that the ADHD student has copied them correctly; (3) write down instructions for the ADHD student; (4) check to be sure that the ADHD student understands instructions before beginning a task; (5) issue a complex set of instructions one step at a time.**

***4. Keep ADHD students' homework to a minimum by providing for work to be completed during class, for example, and even by assigning them less homework than other students.** Psychologist Michael Gordon (reference below) suggests that since ADHD students have difficulty in settling down to work and sustaining their attention

to a task, ADHD children in elementary schools should have no more than 30-45 minutes of homework, older children should have no more than an hour or so.

***5. Make sure that such students have homework assignments written down; that they understand these assignments; and that they leave school with the materials needed to do their work.** Helping ADHD students organize themselves to accomplish tasks may also include seeing that the student has an assignment notebook, checking the student's progress daily, and working with parents to see that work is accomplished. ADHD students often need such support even when the "homework" involves working on something the student is highly interested in.

***6. Work with students who have trouble taking responsibility for their own learning by helping them develop an organizational plan for major projects and a set of intermediate due dates for each step, then supervising and monitoring students' completion of each phase.**

***7. Establish a "note-home" program with parents, according to which the teacher reports on certain agreed-upon concerns:** work completed or not completed, work turned in. Even in high school, ADHD students may need such daily monitoring.

***8. Provide a quiet space to help ADHD students focus and maintain attention on work to be done independently.** This includes tests.

***9. Provide a classroom environment and routine with predictable structure and clear and consistent expectations.** ADHD students are especially frustrated by departures from the expected. Providing a predictable environment lessens such frustration and also contributes to the security all students need to take the risks necessary for learning.

***10. Find ways of enabling ADHD students to succeed in school, regardless of their problems with impulsivity, hyperactivity, and inattention.** This may require soliciting additional help for the student, as provided for by section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act (a ruling by the Office of Civil Rights within the Department of Education.)

For further information:


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This information is drawn from Constance Weaver's concept paper on ADHD (see above reference), published by NCTE, 1991.


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# Basal Reading Programs, Literature-based Reading Programs, and Literature Programs

In the past twenty years, criticisms of basal reading programs have increased dramatically. Most importantly, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers have argued that, as a whole, these reading programs misrepresent why people read and even what people do when they read. In addition, teachers and researchers have shown that stories in basals often use stilted and sometimes nonsensical language.

In response to this criticism, publishers, state departments of education, and school districts have announced major changes in programs for reading instruction. They have developed literature-based reading programs which rely on literature (texts written to be read) instead of basals (texts written to teach reading). But how different are the new literature-based programs from basal programs? Do they merely substitute a piece of literature for a story about Dick and Jane? Or do they fundamentally change the basis for reading instruction to bring it more in line with most current knowledge about reading?

To answer these questions and also to examine particular reading programs in specific schools and districts, it is important to consider the following questions and general answers.

**1. What are the assumptions about reading that undergird the program?**

Basal and literature-based programs assume that learning to read (and possibly even fluent reading) is a matter of exercising component skills that unite in the end to form a complex, mechanical process. This is a technological view that is not supported by highly regarded theoretical models of reading.

By contrast, literature programs view reading as a unitary process that cannot be separated into parts. This process always accounts for readers' purposes and for the contexts in which readers read.

**2. What is the primary reason the texts appear in the program? Are they there primarily to be read and enjoyed, or are they there mainly to teach "skills of reading"?**

In both literature-based programs and basal programs, even if the texts are unabridged and unadapted, the texts are there to teach skills arranged according to grade level. In literature programs, however, the texts are there to be read and enjoyed. They are chosen because they suit particular teachers' and children's interests or tastes. Through reading and enjoying those texts and with the help of teaching tailored to individuals reading particular books, children become better readers.

**3. What kinds of limits are placed on the texts children read?**

Budgets put obvious limits on how much literature is available in a classroom (though here too there are alternatives; money can be spent on a rich heritage of literature or on the impoverished language of workbooks). But there are other constraints. In both basal and literature-based programs, literature is organized into grade levels so that all children at a given grade level read the same books. In fact, in some districts, teachers are not allowed to read books to their class or give their students books that are designated to be used at a different grade level.

In literature programs, however, the constraints follow from students' and teachers' interests rather than from an externally imposed grade-level list. Literature programs assume that good literature is appropriate for any age level if readers are interested.

**4. What supplementary materials go along with the literature?**

In basals using adapted literature and in literature-based programs, publishers or districts provide supplementary materials, including summaries of stories, comprehension questions, suggested activities, units, workbook exercises and vocabulary lists. These materials, organized by grade level just like the literature, embody several erroneous assumptions:

(a) that all children should use the books in the same way and get the same meaning from the texts,
(b) that all children in the same grade have the same background knowledge and interests.

By contrast, in literature programs the "supplementary" materials are other pieces of literature and peers and teachers with whom students can talk about the literature. When children are drawn to a particular author, they read other books by that same author. When one child gets hooked on historical fiction, that child reads another piece of historical fiction. When an author uses an unfamiliar literary device or a puzzling new vocabulary item, teacher and children discuss that device or word in small group sessions.

**5. How much choice and responsibility do teachers and students have?**

Both basal and literature-based programs are organized and planned ahead of time for classroom use; therefore, learners and teachers have few real choices. Instead, they are controlled by the materials which tell them what to read, when to read, and how to read. The units, workbooks, comprehension questions, exercises, and activities provided in basal and literature-based programs force students and teachers to search for someone else's meanings. Instead of following students' interests, the materials induce participants to follow the directions given in the guides. Even when choice is included in reading or writing activities, the choices have been provided by someone outside the classroom who does not know that particular classroom context.

Literature programs, by contrast, draw on a particular classroom community. Teachers and students in classrooms with literature programs choose from a wide range of real, unadapted literature. They explore literature together, read and write their own responses and stories, and create units based on their own questions. When teachers can provide real, unadapted and unabridged literature along with opportunities for choice and exploration, they can capture students' interest and challenge them to explore new avenues with books.

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# How to Teach Literacy Learners Who Challenge Teachers

Teachers who are most successful at meeting the challenge of helping special education students become literate are those who adopt the practices below.

**1. Immerse students in rich literate environments and communities designed to engage students in plentiful opportunities for authentic reading and writing.**

Students learn to read and write by reading and writing; special students need more opportunities for reading and writing rather than fewer. In order to create these learning opportunities, teachers can focus on creating literate environments and communities of learners who use reading and writing for things they find important and relevant. A literate environment can show students the potential of literacy for learning, thinking, enjoyment, and daily life. As students explore their world, they can learn to use literacy in ways that satisfy their curiosity and interests.

In a community of learners, students can learn a great deal about literacy by working together on reading and writing projects, using each other's strengths, and supporting and teaching each other in situations which are more difficult. Once students discover the underlying joy and power of literacy, they will come to look at literacy as a worthwhile challenge rather than as a problem.

**2. Encourage students to become responsible for their own literacy learning by making choices, taking risks, solving problems, and monitoring learning.**

Too often, special education students have become passive learners in classrooms because teachers (and sometimes parents) continually make decisions for them and rescue them from difficulties. Under such conditions, students stop taking responsibility for learning. Students may become passive only when they consider learning difficult; they may take more responsibility in other situations.

Students who are expected to make good choices, to try new things and to take risks in the process, to solve problems, and to participate in assessment of learning will work to fulfill those expectations. If teachers gradually release responsibility to students, they can learn to make excellent choices about such things as reading and writing topics, materials, and tasks; they can learn to try a new reading or writing strategy and monitor its usefulness; and they can learn to solve a variety of problems, often unique ones, that they encounter as readers and writers. This does not mean that teachers should withdraw their support from students but rather that the focus of teaching should be on problem-solving skills and strategies that will enable each student to become his/her own best teacher.

Students who have the capacity to learn on their own, to teach themselves, will learn far more than students who depend solely on others in order to learn. Teachers' (and parents') aim should be to help special students gain control of their own learning—to become active participants in the teaching and learning process. Instead of making decisions for students and rescuing them from difficulties, teachers can help students learn how to make their own decisions and solve their own difficulties in reading and writing.

**3. Make instructional decisions on the basis of knowledge of literacy development and observations of students.**

If prescribed curriculum units and packages are not healthy for normally achieving students, they are deadly for special education students. A teacher who follows a curriculum written by someone else has relinquished a major professional responsibility. It is the teacher—the one with knowledge of his/her particular students' strengths, interests and needs—who is the best curriculum expert. It is the teacher who is most able to plan units of study.

Moreover, when teachers continually and carefully observe and record information about students as they read and write for communicative purposes, teachers have the data needed to teach students rather than to teach a curriculum. When teachers know their students well and when they understand literacy development, they can make the instructional decisions that will most quickly and effectively support literacy learning. Effective teaching involves using on-going assessment data to make thoughtful selections from published curricula, inventing lessons and planning experiences to meet unique needs, and involving students in making and assessing curricular decisions. Always, such effective teaching includes creating opportunities for students to really read and write. And always, effective teaching provides lessons which both support and challenge students in literacy learning while, at the same time, increasing students' responsibility for learning.

**4. Advocate for students to be all they can be, including the readers and writers they can be.**

School policies, teachers and support personnel, parents, other students, and administrators sometimes make decisions or do things which are antithetical to the goal of

helping students become all they can be. Special education teachers can be students' advocates, helping others to reconsider policies, practices, and decisions that work against the literacy learning of their students. Special education students are in school to learn, and all decisions about them must be made with that goal uppermost in mind.

As special students grow older, they can become their own advocates if teachers extend their goal of helping students become responsible for their own learning. When their teachers see situations and policies that are not in the best interests of students' literacy learning, they can teach students about these and what to do about them. Teachers can help students think through the issues and also help them take action about them. In this way, teachers can prepare their special students to help themselves be all they can be in and out of school.

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# What Does It Mean to Be Literate?

## Changing Perceptions of Literacy

Literacy has often been misunderstood. Far from being static, our beliefs about what literacy is and who has it—what it means to be a literate or illiterate adult—are continually in a process of change.

The early American colonists fleeing religious persecution in their own countries valued literacy because it allowed them to read the Bible and therefore to interpret God's word for themselves. As our country grew, literacy also became valued as a tool for socializing newcomers to American ways. That is, literacy became a patriotic as well as a Christian responsibility. As the industrial revolution progressed, scientific knowledge (knowledge gained from activity in the physical, biological, and social sciences) began to compete with religious knowledge. Social scientists, seeing themselves as social engineers, began to search for universal laws governing social concerns that would be counterparts to the universal laws physical scientists were finding about the physical world. One such search aimed at finding a series of discrete literacy-related skills that would be the same for everyone. The idea was that once those skills were isolated, the problem of illiteracy could be easily eradicated since skills could be scientifically identified and managed.

## Literacy as a Set of Skills

The popular perception of literacy as a set of isolated skills is the one that predominates today. The popular common sense notion is that we read and comprehend by working from smaller parts to larger parts: sounding out parts of words, then words, then sentences to get meaning from what we read. According to this logic, adult beginning readers could work their way through a set of graduated workbooks focused first on small and then on larger parts and could then be tested on their mastery of discrete skills, just as children are. (Many standardized tests for adults, in fact, equate literacy levels with school grade equivalencies, describing an adult as at a "second grade" or "third grade" reading level.) During the seventies and eighties, the emphasis on skills shifted toward greater attention to specific tasks experts believed an adult needed to perform to get along (filling in forms, reading newspaper ads, writing checks). But the underlying assumptions about reading and writing and learning to read and write remained unchanged.

## Literacy as a Set of Social Practices

In recent years, however, new views of what literacy means and how it is learned have challenged the literacy-as-skills perspective. As literacy researchers got out of the classroom and into real-life communities they began to see that it is impossible to isolate a single, autonomous "thing" called literacy. Instead there are many literacies determined by ethnicity, age, gender, economics and a host of other factors. Moreover, most literacy tasks are social—reading family letters, sending greeting cards, keeping a family history in the Bible, reading aloud a newspaper story about a local event. Not only is literacy usually practiced in social groups, but it is often collaborative, with more than one person helping to complete a single literacy task. For instance, a young girl might control the actual technology of getting the words for a letter to a government office down on the page. Her mother might know the specialized knowledge that needs to be included in the letter. But her grandfather might also contribute by adding his understanding of the social implications for their family of writing that letter. Literacy, in real life situations like this, is not a solitary activity.

## Illiteracy as a Social Stigma

Many illiterate adults have social networks that permit literacy to be taken advantage of by many but not possessed by everyone. For example, a seamstress might exchange her technical skills for those of a friend who could help her write down a recipe; a businessman might dictate letters into a tape recorder for a secretary to type. Often, it is not so much being unable to read and write that has a damaging effect; it is the stigma attached to illiteracy by society.

Throughout history, U.S. society has devalued (and continues to devalue) the wisdom, common sense, and dignity of adults who do not read and write. In the colonial period, illiterate adults came to be seen as morally inferior and lacking in religious development just because they could not read the Bible. During WW I, the public image of the recruit with limited literacy skills was someone who was more vulnerable to propaganda and more likely to exhibit "unscientific" behavior. In the post WW II era a medical model of literacy led to a commonly held belief that illiterate adults were blank slates awaiting the "treatment" of literacy. During the 1960s, assumptions behind some of the rhetoric of the War on Poverty linked illiteracy and intellectual impoverishment. (Some printed statements from that period went so far as to compare the mind of an illiterate person with an unplanted seed!)

The stigma associating illiteracy with incompetence is a reflection of biases within the literate community. Such a stigma serves to obscure the inherent dignity and rich social lives of all adults.

## Literacy as Critical Reflection and Action

This growing understanding of literacy as an essentially social practice has led many literacy teachers and researchers to conclude that literacy education must, by nature, be about more than just "reading the word." Rather, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire points out, "reading the word implies reading the world." In this view, literacy offers adults a way to begin to see how society's myths and assumptions have shaped their own

beliefs, perceptions and actions. Through critical reflection on their own lives, they are able to consider how they might act together to create conditions for a more just society.

Many literacy educators have begun to see that in our culture one of the first steps in this process is helping adult learners to see through the social stigma of illiteracy. As adults have begun to speak out about their lives in their literacy classrooms, it has become clear that many have internalized society's links between illiteracy and incompetency. These adults remember painful lessons they learned as children in public school. Unable to keep up, they were pushed to the back of the classroom, "passed by," laughed at, taunted for being "stupid" or "a retard," until they came to believe they would never learn. Rather than face the shame and embarrassment of revealing their inability to read and write, they developed elaborate means to hide it from others or to avoid situations in which literacy might pose a problem. Unable to step back and see that the school or poverty or family conditions might have been a factor, many adults come to literacy classes believing their illiteracy is the result only of their own failings. While they may have gone on to become successful in other areas of their lives, the stigma of illiteracy still looms in the background.

For many adults who finally do gain the confidence to enter a literacy classroom, an important first step on the road to literacy is the chance to unpack their own literacy histories and to critically reflect on the underlying causes of illteracy. Participating in groups with other learners gives adults the chance to hear the stories of others, realize they are not alone in their perceptions, and begin to speak up and voice what they may already have known: just because they cannot read and write does not mean they lack knowledge and experience of value to themselves and others. For some adults, overcoming the internalized stigma and shame of illiteracy is just as important as gaining the ability to get words down on the page. Lidia, a fifty-year old mother of four, put it this way:

*I learned that I matter. I learned that no matter what happened as a child, you live through it. If you go through those trials and tribulations that is an education in itself you wouldn't understand if you didn't go through it. It wasn't just the ability to write. It was the image of myself. I'm not just a little grain anymore . . .*

*It's as if I've known all along and I thought, "Why did I think I was just a seed when I've done so much in my life without reading and writing? You have to break free to form yourself and say, "It doesn't matter. Hey, I matter. My voice matters."*

For many adults, beginning to feel more comfortable with themselves, to feel more independent in their public and private lives, and to feel as if they have greater general control over their futures is an important outcome of becoming literate. From there they can begin to name their own personal and social goals for literacy.

## Involving Everyone in Our Conversations: What We Can Do

If we are to create a broader view of literacy, all of us need to find ways to value and give voice to the perspectives and opinions of our less literate neighbors. We need to examine ways they may have been silenced or marginalized in our communities and to make sure we reach out to include them at meetings for parents and at other community events. We need to examine how teachers, researchers, policy makers, the media, and we ourselves may create a wall between ourselves and an illiterate adult because of our own stereotyping. And, in an environment where literacy classes exist for only 4% of those who might benefit from them, we need to speak out for funding for adult educational services.

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# Adult Illiteracy: Cause? Effect?

**Common Assumption: Illiteracy Causes Poverty and Crime.**

A pervasive but erroneous assumption about adult illiteracy is that it causes many social ills—poverty and crime especially. Jonathan Kozol's Illiterate America (1985), for example, charges that 60 million Americans cannot read, and therefore cannot hold down any jobs except the most menial. Many popular press articles on adult literacy explicitly cite illiteracy as a cause of poverty, as does this recent advertisement for New York City's United Way (Village Voice, March 20, 1990), which shows a dejected man on a street curb and reads:

*This is illiteracy.*
*This is alcohol.*
*This is homelessness.*
*Homelessness has many causes. But with just one contribution you can support hundreds of programs that attack the roots of the problem . . .*

It is not only lay persons who promulgate this sort of stereotyping. The 1990 president of the International Reading Association, Dale D. Johnson, in speaking to IRA's first North American Conference on Adult and Adolescent Literacy on January 13, 1990, said, "We can't divorce our concern for literacy from our concern for the homeless."

The harm in assuming that illiteracy causes various social ills is at least threefold:

(1) it focuses attention, energy, and funds on illiteracy instead of on the circumstances in which illiteracy flourishes;

(2) it is wrong; many illiterate and low-literate adults in the US have jobs, live productive lives, and contribute positively to the society around them;

(3) it lends itself to blaming the victim. Those who cannot read are blamed not only for their own illiteracy but, if they are also unemployed and live amidst deplorable conditions, their illiteracy is in turn blamed for their low status. The thinking goes, "If they would just learn to read, they could get good jobs, move out of the ghetto, and join the country club." It doesn't work that way.

**A More Accurate Idea: Correlation, Not Cause**

We should not confuse correlations with causes. In 1979, David Harman and Carmen St. John Hunter published Adult Illiteracy in the United States: Report to the Ford Foundation. Over a decade later, this is still the most respected and dependable work on adult illiteracy in this country. Harman and Hunter estimated that there were then between 18 and 28 million hard-core, invisible poor who suffered from multiple deprivations: poverty, unemployment, crime and illiteracy. And that was before crack cocaine.

If being illiterate caused joblessness, substandard housing, or high infant mortality, then becoming literate should undo or at least begin to solve these problems. Now it is true that when poor and illiterate adults learn to read, they benefit in many ways. But they do not necessarily increase their chances of getting jobs when there are no jobs to be had. Their new literacy does not end gang warfare in their neighborhoods, nor does it provide affordable housing when the single room occupancy dwellings are torn down or the low-rent buildings are converted to high-rent, gentrified condominiums. It does not change the odds of life or death for their babies (a baby born today in Harlem has less chance of growing up than a baby born in Bangladesh.) Moreover, many ghetto dwellers as well as homeless people are already amply literate yet their literacy has not earned them safe living space or a secure future.

The standard of living in the US rose considerably in the early 20th century, yet the literacy levels for many adults were much lower than they are today. These low literacy levels neither prevented nor caused the economic growth of the early 20th century. Similarly, while inadequate literacy complicates the serious social problems of the late 20th century, it does not cause them. To remedy large-scale social problems requires first of all that we analyze those problems correctly.

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# Questions and Answers about Spelling

**What is invented spelling?**

Invented spelling is the term currently used to describe the spellings that learners produce as they come to understand how written language and its spelling system work. Children learning to write in any alphabetic language will invent spellings. Many educators believe "invented spelling" is a more accurate term than "misspelling" since it recognizes that such spellings are not random but are based on the learner's knowledge of language. For instance, a young child who writes LIX for "likes" is relating the sounds she hears to the names of letters that she knows. When an older child writes MATHYOU for the name "Matthew", it shows a knowledge that whole words can be combined to create new ones. There is a good deal of research that shows how logical children's spellings are.

**Is invented spelling a good idea?**

Many teachers have begun encouraging children to use invented spelling as they write, particularly for beginning writers and students who are fearful about writing, and for first-draft writing. Invented spelling lets children get their ideas down on paper independently, using all the words in their speaking vocabulary, without having to ask an adult how to spell every unfamiliar word.

**Doesn't invented spelling create bad habits?**

Invented spelling isn't something children do instead of learning how to spell; it is an avenue to learning how to spell. This happens in two ways. First, as children think about and discuss their invented spellings as they produce them, they increase their knowledge of how our spelling system works. Second, children learn to find and correct their invented spellings when they are producing a final draft of a piece of writing. Children also learn the spelling of many individual words as they read. In fact, a strong reading program where children read widely contributes to growth in spelling.

It is also important to remember that learning and growth cannot take place without mistakes, and that errors should be welcomed as signs of growth. Just as children outgrow less mature forms of speech as they use oral language, they outgrow their early invented spellings if they make frequent use of written language.

**Should children's writing with invented spelling be allowed to go home or appear on bulletin boards?**

If children are spelling well already (90% or better on first drafts), then it is often appropriate to aim for 100% correctness in a polished, finished product, mainly because it is part of the pride of authorship to clean up such easily corrected imperfections. However, for less accomplished writers, many teachers publish or display work that still has invented spellings, although they still include some proofreading as a part of the process. Other teachers have adult volunteers type perfectly spelled final copies of published material because they believe that if other children are going to read the child-author's book, those children should be provided with conventionally spelled print to read. In any case, the thing to remember is that it is not developmentally appropriate to expect learners to produce perfectly spelled final copies before they can do it fairly easily.

**How do I know if a child is improving in spelling?**

The best way to track improvement in spelling is by looking at how a child spells when writing (rather than on tests). Three things to look for are:
(1) has the number of correctly spelled words generally increased over time?
(2) are invented spellings becoming more mature? (For instance, the spelling LAUHG for "laugh" is more advanced than LAF because it shows a knowledge of how the word looks as well as how it sounds.)
(3) is the student getting better at proofreading his or her own writing and making corrections for a final draft?

**What is the role of spelling books?**

Spelling textbooks are designed not as an ideal curriculum but as a least common denominator; they provide a very basic spelling curriculum based on learning lists of words. The other activities in the textbooks exist primarily to help students learn the words. Spelling textbooks take up a great deal of time for the amount of learning they provide. Research shows that since students already know how to spell most (about 65%) of the words in their textbooks, they are only learning a few words a week. A good teacher who downplays memorizing and makes spelling part of writing can do far more than spelling textbooks in less time.

**Shouldn't students be learning words from lists every week, even if they aren't using a spelling book?**

Students can become good spellers without formally memorizing words. If they do memorize weekly lists, the best approach is to learn about five words a week that are individualized for each child, based on the words they use in their writing and that they are interested in. Children can learn to choose words for themselves each week.

**What about standardized tests in spelling?**

Standardized tests ask students to pick out the one correctly (or incorrectly) spelled word from a short list. Although this has been shown to be closely related to the ability to spell words dictated from a list, the most important measure of a student's spelling is the ability to produce good spellings in a final draft of a piece of writing (to an age-appropriate extent). This can't be measured on a standardized test.

**Don't students need to be good spellers for when they grow up and enter the working world?**

Yes! And to do this, they need to learn to take responsibility for their own spelling; they need to learn how to proofread their own work and they need to realize when it is important to do so. Teachers circling students' misspellings for them gets in the way of students learning to be good independent spellers.

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## What Are Some Tools Teachers Use to Evaluate That Also Help Children Learn?

Caring and professional teachers are concerned about what their students know, what their students are interested in, the ways their students learn, and what they learn. Such broad yet detailed and individualzed understanding of students' learning cannot be gained from a numerical score on any kind of test. Evaluation of learning takes a knowledgeable professional with a number of ways to know students well. Such teachers evaluate their students as they watch them work in class, as they discuss important issues with a group of students, as they confer with students individually, and as they carefully analyze a student's reading, writing, oral interactions and other school projects. Such teachers can use a variety of strong evaluation tools that become lasting records of a student's learning. A discussion of such tools follows.

### Inventories and Interviews

Checklists, inventories and interviews allow teachers to find out what their students know and what they are most interested in. These tools reveal students' attitudes about language, the kinds of materials they read and the range of topics they write about. By using such forms over time, teachers see changes in their students and also in their teaching—changes which often reflect students' development. Teachers can use such information to help them relate what students already know and are interested in to new knowledge and experiences. Students can also be involved in recording their own work, which can be discussed with the teacher during conference time.

### Portfolios and Samples of Work

In programs where students write regularly and participate in reading programs devoted to the use of literature, teachers with the help of students keep portfolios of students' written work as well as tapes of oral reading, lists of readings, reading responses and results of reading and writing conferences. Samples of students' actual work over time provide powerful opportunities to monitor students' developing control over the linguistic systems (phonics, spelling, grammar, the cohesion and coherence of stories and other types of writing) and to see how students' compositions, their reading comprehension, voice, sense of story and use of various genres develop. Samples of students' work are rich in opportunities to invite students, parents, and other school personnel to share in the evaluation process. Parents report that such evaluation provides them with greater insight about their child's learning than any other kind of evaluation instrument. Teachers choose to evaluate different aspects of students' learning at different times, depending on what information is needed. Students grow in their ability to self evaluate and to value themselves as learners. There are schools and school districts that have developed writing and reading portfolios to keep files of students' work to pass along with the student from grade to grade. Such portfolios can document students' growth in all curricular areas. Students can be involved in selecting at specified intervals the kinds of material which they believe represent their work, some to be kept for school records and some to be taken home and saved.

### Dialogue Journals and Learning Logs

Teachers and students who write back and forth to each other about their learning and other signifcant experiences in their lives learn a great deal about each other. Such journals are another record to use for evaluation purposes over time. Students record how their own learning has expanded and what school experiences will be most beneficial to them. Teachers help students reflect on their own development so that they gain greater insight into themselves as learners. Dialogue journals and learning logs give teachers the opportunity to have one-to-one written conversations with students that they do not always have the time for during a busy school day. Students appreciate such individual attention.

### Anecdotal Records

A carefully documented record of a particularly significant event, including information about time, persons involved and other important aspects of the social context, is one of the most useful pieces of evaluative information a teacher can have. It provides a record that a number of interested parties can review independently or discuss together to interpret its possible meanings. It provides opportunities for students to verify the teacher's perceptions. Some teachers make sure to observe every student at least once every two or three weeks. Other teachers find it best to do such recordings once a month or twice a

semester on each student. Anecdotal records do not need to be kept in exactly the same manner throughout the year. Early in the school year teachers may make regular and detailed entries about many aspects of students' learning. As teachers get to know their students, the type of entries will change, focusing more specifically on what the teacher wants to record about the individual student; these observations are recorded only when a relevant activity occurs. At the end of a reporting period, a semester or the school year, the teacher may find it helpful to obtain a few more formal entries on each student. The teacher may keep a notebook or two in a few strategic places in the classroom to jot down general impressions by noting key words, dates and names. It is not always possible to write a complete anecdotal record at the critical moment when something important happens that provides significant evidence about development, but a few jotted notes can be used at a more convenient time to record more formal notes. Perhaps some day, teachers will have electronic machines to orally record information on students regularly. The resulting tapes will then be given to a typist hired for that purpose who will transcribe the tapes and add them to students' files.

**Conferences**

A major aspect of the writing process curriculum that has become popular in recent years includes the use of different kinds of conferences between the teacher and the students. Such conferences have expanded to include conversation about students' writing, reading, and other aspects of their daily learning. All the evaluation instruments that have been discussed may become part of the conference. The results of these conferences also become part of the record keeping system. Some schools encourage teachers to involve parents in a three-way conference with students so that the education of the student becomes a collaborative effort between the home and the school.

The purpose in such rich evaluation is to help students expand their abilities and extend their view of themselves as active learners in a complex world.

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# Some Aspects of Assessment that We Often Forget

Not very long ago, a group of Swiss researchers developed the mechanism for the modern electronic watch. Their superiors, however, could not conceive of such a watch being a real watch. Indeed, they were so confident of their view that they did not even patent the discovery. This failure to see things in a different way resulted in the Swiss, who had a virtual monopoly on watches, losing almost all of the market in a very short space of time.

It is very easy for us to be limited by our history and not to think problems through in more productive ways. Educational assessment issues are no different. Very often we have relied on beliefs which have led us to counterproductive "solutions." Our own schooling has left us with some pervasive beliefs which are difficult to break out of and which leave us tinkering with techniques which have already failed us. Consider the following beliefs and their consequences.

**1. Holding teachers publicly accountable with standardized tests will make them do a better job.**

Accountability testing has increased over the last few years, and with it have come changes in students' educational lives. Increasing numbers of students are retained, placed in transition classes, or classified as learning disabled. Each of these changes has had unfortunate consequences for most children but they have not had the effect of improving the quality of education or even of increasing test scores. Instead, schools faced with potential public embarrassment about student test performance adopt short-term defensive strategies rather than long-term plans for genuinely improving education. They exempt some children (e.g., those classified as handicapped) from normal testing; they encourage others to be absent on the day of the test; they spend the year "teaching to the test" rather than offering higher quality curricula. Children faced with potential public embarrassment about test performance also adopt short-term strategies which are rarely aimed at improving the quality of their education. They do not become enthusiastic and more involved in their work.

**2. Schools should produce regular gains on standardized tests.**

A standardized, norm-referenced test is especially designed so that children's performances will look as different from each other as possible and will produce a "bell-shaped" distribution of scores, with a few students scoring high and a few scoring low, but everyone else in the middle. However, nobody likes having children look less than normal. Everyone would like to move all of the children from the bottom half of the normal distribution to the top half. But this is statistically impossible. The tests are designed so that this should not happen. Recently, however, it did happen. Thus we were faced with a dilemma: were the test norms wrong, or were the schools doing an extraordinary job of teaching, or were the schools cheating? Different people have different opinions but few believed that the schools were doing a better job. Most thought they were cheating. In other words, schools find themselves in the situation of being publicly "damned if you do and damned if you don't." However, they do not find themselves in the position of being better informed about how to improve instruction or in being better supported in those endeavors to improve instruction which are indeed better informed.

**3. If we set standards, then we will know what students are supposed to know, and if the standards are high, then teachers will work harder to attain those high standards.**

Any standard of attainment in schools is arbitrary. There is no way to decide what a child SHOULD know at any particular age. The major confusion here is between STANDARDS and STANDARDIZATION. The concern for standards usually is motivated by a concern that students are not learning as much as they should or could. It is basically a concern over how to ensure that students are getting the best instruction possible. Standardization is often motivated by a desire to increase administrative efficiency.

But standards and standardization are different. Suppose we set a particular standard for all eighth graders. How does that help an eighth grade teacher provide optimal instruction for a child who is above or below that standard? The teacher is faced with the problem of helping all individual students set high and manageable standards for themselves. A standardized standard, particularly with public consequences, is merely a distraction in this situation.

**4. Tests are objective and scientific, and therefore superior to teachers' analyses of students' development.**

There is a common confusion over the terms "objective" and "subjective". What is seen as "objective" is

viewed as scientific, unbiased and real. What is seen as "subjective" is considered inferior and probably biased. This is a distinction left over from earlier beliefs about science which quantum physicists began to dispel as they realized that what you see depends very much on the instruments you use to look with.

This is certainly true in education. Standardized tests are designed by people with a particular view of reading, and the scores produced by the tests have to be interpreted by people with particular views of reading. Decisions about what to test and what will count as THE correct answer are made by people who have biases—just as any human being does. What might make a standardized test SEEM unbiased is that the biased test writers are not present when the biased tests are given, and it is only a machine doing the scoring, a machine designed to identify which answers match the biased answer sheet.

Assessment based on a collection of a student's written work over a period of time accompanied by the teacher's and student's comments on the work may seem inferior to test scores because of its lack of comparability and its apparent subjectivity. But such assessment provides richer, more useful information to teachers, students, and parents. Moreover, as teacher and student reflect together on the work, both learn more.

**The Bottom Line**

The purpose of standards and accountability is to try to ensure that teachers and schools are doing everything possible to provide students with an optimal education. We know that teachers teach better when they are personally involved with their teaching and their students. We know that students learn more when they are personally involved with their learning material. Another way to pose our problem, then, is this: how can we arrange a situation in which teachers and students will feel involved and responsible—a situation in which all will care more about their teaching and their learning? How can we design assessment so that it supports effective learning and teaching, instead of subverting them? Standardized standards and standardized tests cannot accomplish these tasks.

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# Who Should Evaluate? What Should Be Evaluated?

How we judge others is based on our continuous contacts with them. We decide how much people know and how empathetic they are through our conversations and interactions with them. Based on hundreds of daily contacts, we gauge our children's growth. We know when we need to buy them longer pants when we see them sitting, walking, and playing in the old ones. We know what they understand about the world when we hear them talk about current issues. We know what they are reading and writing by talking with or watching them. We judge their empathy for others as we see them respond to family members and friends. As caring parents, we don't need to go to doctors to tell us how much our children have grown physically, intellectually and emotionally. Though we may take them to a doctor for periodic examinations that include measurements of weight and height, we never expect that these measurements will make them taller, heavier, or easier to live with.

As parents, we respond to our children with all of our senses. We often discount those responses as "merely common sense". Such sensitivity—and our "sense" about our kids— isn't common to all, however. It is only common to those who build their parental sense over a period of time, with genuine concern and caring for their growing children.

In the same way, knowledgeable, caring teachers continuously monitor and evaluate the development of their students through their daily conversations and interactions. Teachers have hundreds of contacts with students daily. In each of these contacts, teachers make judgments about their students. They know how they use language in different settings, what they like to read, how easily they write, how they interact with other kids, what aspects of knowledge they know a lot about, and how all of these change over the course of weeks or months. In these evaluations teachers use their professional senses. A professional sense is based on teachers' knowledge and experience concerning how students learn and what the teachers themselves know about language, the development of literacy, and other subject matter fields. Teachers who know they are competent in such evaluation are willing to take responsibility for their judgments and have no problem being accountable to their students, their parents, and the other professionals in their schools and districts.

Sometimes, because numbers take on an aura of objectivity which they do not deserve, statistical test data is equated with the development of knowledge and is valued more highly than the professional sense of an informed, committed teacher who can use knowledge about the students, the context, and the community to make valuative judgments. We must become aware of the limitations of statistical test data and legitimize the teacher's professional abilities to evaluate students through their ongoing daily work with students. Of course, teachers need to know the limitations of their professional sense. They must exercise caution with their judgments about their students. They must confirm their judgments by using a variety of ways to gather information and to analyze what their students are accomplishing. But when the power of professional intuitions is denigrated with comments such as "it's just subjective" or "test scores are better than nothing", the conversation about professional judgments is shut down. Such denigration prevents us from thinking seriously about the legitimate uses of the professional sense of teachers.

The professional senses that teachers develop for evaluating their students require teachers to always be learners in the classroom. A teacher's personal knowledge base about how language, literacy, and thinking develop becomes the foundation on which professional sense grows. Professional teachers read the latest information about teaching and learning and explain their judgments about children's growth and development to the students, their parents, and other school professionals. The more teachers' professional sense about evaluation is valued by school personnel and parents, the more teachers are willing to build the background knowledge necessary to assess students' abilities and to relate how students' growth is directly tied to the ways teachers teach. This kind of relationship—the relationship between teaching, learning, and evaluation—becomes the foundation for true accountability.

The major questions for evaluation based on teachers' professional sense are:

- how are students actively learning about their world?
- how are they going about answering their own questions and the important questions posed by others?

- how are they using language and thinking to get all this done?

At the same time professional teachers are supporting their students' inquiry, they are evaluating. There is no way to separate the role of evaluation from the tools of learning and the ongoing curriculum. While students are learning, the teacher is observing and interacting, questioning, and challenging. The teacher is always contemplating and analyzing what these observations and interactions mean in terms of the learner's growth.

This kind of evaluation doesn't get in the way of students' learning. Learning does not have to stop for evaluation to take place. The curriculum is not interrupted for standardized testing. Rather, it is through on-going, daily learning experiences that teachers become aware of how each student is growing and what to do to help each student continue to develop.

As the students are actively involved in learning with the teacher, both the teacher and the students are asking questions such as: How am I doing? Are things going as I expect them to? Am I learning more and getting better at what I'm doing? Who seems confused? How did things go in our discussion group today? Through such questions, students become involved in self evaluation and take responsiblity for their own learning. Through these questions teachers evaluate the students and make appropriate changes in their teaching.

There are strong evaluation tools that are helpful to both teachers and students when they are used in concert with teachers' professional sense. Such tools provide a rich pool of information about a student's learning. At the same time these tools invite students, parents, and other school professionals to be active participants in the evaluation process. These tools include inverviews and inventories to find out what children know and are interested in, portfolios of work in progress, records of completed projects, conferences for looking at how students have developed over time, and the teacher's notes on how students read and write and interact with peers and adults in the school setting. Teachers need to decide which are most beneficial for their situation and their students.

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# The Mixed Age Primary: What and Why

Mixed grade and ungraded primaries are classrooms in which the ages of children in a single classroom will span several years. Mixed age classrooms are alternatives to the usual single-grade classroom in which the age span is considerably smaller. In some mixed age arrangements, children may still be considered first (or second or third) graders but their classmates are from higher and lower grades. In ungraded primaries, children are considered primary students but do not have a grade designation at all. Whether mixed grade or ungraded, the children of mixed ages are usually divided about evenly by age. Each year, one third of the class (the oldest) leaves and a new third (the youngest) enters. The children stay with the same teacher for three years (two, if the class consists only of what would be first and second graders or second and third graders). In most mixed age primaries, no child is retained (that is, no child fails) the first two years, though most schools permit retention in the third year.

Not only are the children in a mixed age primary of mixed ages; the children who are the same age are also of mixed abilities. This is also the case in single-grade classrooms, even those aiming for homogeneous grouping. But in those traditionally organized classrooms, varied abilities are seen as a problem requiring solutions. Some of those traditional solutions are to place children into reading groups that supposedly represent one common "ability level" (Eagles or Robins or Pigeons), to assign different materials that have been written for different "levels", and to differentiate school tasks —usually giving more interesting, demanding, and enriching tasks to the "high" students.

In mixed-age primaries, however, the mix of abilities as well as the mix of ages is seen not as a problem but as a wonderful resource to be celebrated and used for the benefit of all. This resource is tapped daily through joint projects, through both directed and spontaneous peer teaching, and through work in more "family-like" groupings (for example, on the one hand, children of different ages but similar abilities and interests working together as peers; on the other, children of widely varying abilities and ages working together as "expert" and "novice").

One of the most important theoretical premises behind the mixed age primary is that learning is social: children not only learn from adults; they learn from each other. All over the world, in play groups and in families, older children teach younger ones and vice versa. Also, younger ones remind older ones of where they have been and older ones show younger ones where they are now and where they are going.

Another premise of the mixed age primary is that development and learning are not even. Throughout life, people's learning and growth plateaus at times, sometimes regresses, and at other times, spurts forward. Mixed age primaries are set up to handle such plateaus, regressions, and spurts. As some teachers in a school with mixed age primary classrooms have reported, some children " spurt, others sputter, while others are quietly taking in for a long time and then suddenly the magic occurs. Gabriel was one of those first graders who sat and took in, rarely giving evidence of any learning. In a single-grade classroom, he would probably have been retained, but in the ungraded primary, he was able to return the next year as a second grade student. The first month of second grade, he suddenly selected a book and read fluently and with understanding. The magic had occurred!" (Amavisca et al, 1991).

Of course, such "magic" does not come from merely putting children of different ages together in the same classroom. If the mixed-age classroom retains a traditional curriculum full of exercises, a curriculum based on a belief in isolated skills, there will be only minimal benefit from the new grouping. But most early childhood educators currently advocating mixed age grouping also advocate something other than the traditional curriculum. They urge that a change in beliefs and practices accompany the new grouping and the longer stay with a single teacher. Some of these more developmentally appropriate practices are:

1. building a curriculum based on making sense and solving problems (making sense of written texts, making sense of the physical and social world);
2. inviting children to learn from hands-on activity, from the writings of others, and from reflecting on the connections among their own first hand investigations and the reports of others;
3. stocking the classroom with "real world" materials (e.g., children's literature, measuring equipment, cooking equipment, art supplies, musical instruments, etc.);
4. planning the curriculum around children's interests and these "real world" materials;
5. planning for children to work at their own pace;

6. grouping children to increase opportunities for cross-age and cross-ability interaction as children work together on school tasks;
7. using space flexibly;
8. observing children ("kid watching") with increased sophistication about their language and learning;
9. evaluating children through observing them in action and looking at long-term collections of their work rather than through testing them or assessing single products produced solely for evaluation.

When such curricula and practices are further enhanced by grouping children of mixed ages together, the result is developmentally appropriate education. The advantages arising from these curricular practices which educate with rather than against the grain are discussed in many of the informational statements in this packet (see "Basal Reading Programs, Literature Based Reading Programs, and Literature Programs," "Bilingual Learners: Principles that Help; False Assumptions that Harm," "Questions and Answers about Spelling," "Research in Support of Whole Language," "Why Teachers Shouldn't Teach Intensive, Systematic Phonics"). Some added advantages of the mixed age grouping as a setting for such curricula are:

1. Older children "model the future" for the younger ones, allowing the younger children to envision possibilities and therefore to grow into their visions with greater certainty. Parents of children in mixed age primaries frequently report that their younger children talk about wanting to read the books an older friend is reading or about trying to write "chapter books" like those their older classmates have produced.
2. The presence of younger children provides an opportunity for less stressful and more successful interactions for those older children who are less mature. The presence of younger ones can also help reverse the unhealthy trend of "pushing down" the curriculum—turning pre-schools, kindergartens, and first grades into "academic boot camps" full of supposedly rigorous but actually meaningless skill and drill exercises. It is not just pre-schoolers who learn through imaginary play, drama, and art. So do primary school children. Single-grade classrooms permit such necessary activity in kindergarten and first grade but then eliminate it later on. The presence of younger children helps preserve a more developmentally appropriate curriculum for the older children in the classroom.
3. Mixed age grouping invites cooperation and nurturing and tends to reduce discipline problems. It creates a sense of trust and a "good family feeling" within the classroom. It gives children a sense of belonging. Teachers have reported hearing "oldtimer" children tell newcomers not to tease or laugh at others because "we're all family here" and "we have to take care of each other."
4. Spending three years with one teacher prevents children from "falling through the cracks." Teachers get to know each child better, watching each with a variety of others as they carry out a much broader range of activities.
5. Mixed age primaries provide greater continuity. The teacher knows at the start of the year what special services need to be continued for which children. Teachers are able to document continuous progress. Children can see that learning in school is continuous as they begin where they left off at the end of the year.
6. Mixed age primaries promote better communication between home and school. Over three years, teachers have more time to explain school programs to parents and parents have more time to help the teacher learn who their child is as a learner at home.

In conjunction with an integrated, hands-on curriculum, mixed age primary classrooms offer children an outstanding environment for learning.

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# Bilingual Learners: Principles that Help; False Assumptions that Harm

Bilingual learners, by and large, have received fragmented and disempowering instruction. For the most part, their instruction has been based on a set of damaging assumptions about bilingual students and how they learn. Below are listed seven of the assumptions that have hindered school success and ultimately limited the potential of bilingual students. Each assumption is contrasted with a whole language principle. When teachers develop language curricula that are consistent with the whole language principles, they expand their bilingual students' potential for success.

| **False Assumptions That Harm Bilingual Learners** | **Whole Language Principles That Help Bilingual Learners** |
|---|---|
| 1. Learning proceeds from part to whole. | 1. Learning proceeds from whole to part. |
| 2. Programs should be teacher-centered because learning is the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student. | 2. Programs should be learner-centered because learning is construction of knowledge by the student. |
| 3. Schoolwork should focus on the future. | 3. Schoolwork should have meaning and purpose for the student now. |
| 4. Learning occurs when students work alone. | 4. Learning occurs when students engage in social interaction. |
| 5. In a second language, oral language acquisition precedes the development of literacy. | 5. In a second language, oral and written language develop simultaneously. |
| 6. Limited English speakers have limited learning potential. | 6. Learning potential is expanded through faith in the learner. |
| 7. Learning should take place in English to facilitate the acquisition of English. | 7. Learning should take place in the first language to build concepts and facilitate the acquisition of English. |

**False Assumption #1: Learning goes from part to whole.**

Traditionally, second language teaching has been fragmented with lessons focusing on the teaching of isolated vocabulary words, grammar rules, or sounds of the target language. Although it may seem logical that learning a second language should proceed from these small parts to the whole, and while it then would seem doubly logical that second language teaching should proceed in that way, it is not accurate.

**Actually: Learning goes from whole to part.**

Our brains are constantly trying to make sense of the parts we are given. We continually try to figure out what the whole is. When second language learners are taught parts of a language outside the context of functional language use, they are often at a loss as they try to put the parts together. Learning is easier when students get the big picture, the whole, first. The whole gives students a framework, the border for the puzzle, and the parts can then be fitted inside.

**False Assumption #2: Programs should be teacher-centered.**

Since second language learners do not know English and the teacher does, there is often a temptation to have teacher-centered instruction rather than a learner-centered classroom.

**Actually: Whether or not students know English, they must still construct their knowledge for themselves.**

What all learners rely on as they build new knowledge and learn is the knowledge, interests, and outlooks they already have. That is why student-centered programs make so much sense. They acknowledge that language minority students know a lot; they just do not speak English. Student-centered programs build upon the fact that bilingual learners have many stories to tell and will do so eagerly when given the opportunity to talk about their experiences. In many whole language classrooms, immigrant students write their personal histories and, in this way, are able to show their background knowledge, their creativity, and learn English at the same time. Learning is easier when it starts where the students is rather than where the teacher is.

**False Assumption #3: Schoolwork should focus on the future.**

All too often the curriculum is centered on the future. Students are told to learn because "some day, you are going to need to know what is being taught today."

**But actually: If students see a use for something now, they are more likely to learn it.**

Therefore, whole language teachers plan curricula so that students have a function and purpose for what they are doing now. These teachers have found that students learn more easily when what they are learning fits into something they are doing or interested in right now (e.g., students are more open to coaching on how to hammer when they are building something; they are more receptive to instruction on how to read maps when they are trying to get somewhere; they concentrate on learning to give directions when they want someone else to do something, etc.). Learning is easier when students see a purpose in what they are learning and when they can make choices among assignments that serve their present needs.

**False Assumption #4: Learning takes place as students work alone.**

Because it is wrongly assumed that bilingual learners might teach each other poor habits in speaking English, classes are generally structured in ways that isolate students from each other. Students are isolated when they sit in straight rows and answer the questions the teacher asks. They are also isolated when they sit in front of computer screens and answer questions on the new electronic worksheets computers can generate endlessly.

**But actually: Researchers have shown that group work facilitates language learning.**

Working with others gives bilingual learners more opportunities to use language. It also improves the quality of the language used and motivates learners to use language in meaningful ways. In whole language classrooms, bilingual students work together on projects to explore topics of interest to them. They investigate questions by reading together and talking together, and then they write up their findings and also present their findings orally to others. Learning happens more readily during social interaction.

**False Assumption #5: Oral language develops before written language.**

Traditionally, second language teaching has moved from listening to speaking to reading and then to writing. The assumption has been that oral language acquisition precedes the development of literacy, especially for second language learners.

**But actually: Researchers looking at the development of literacy in bilingual children have shown that students benefit from being exposed to oral and written language—listening, speaking, reading and writing—from the beginning.**

Many second language learners read and write before they speak or understand oral language. Moreover, students' speech improves with the help of literacy and vice versa. Learning is easier when oral and written language develop together.

**False Assumption #6: Limited English proficient students have limited learning potential.**

There is a tendency to underestimate the potential of second language learners because they do not speak English or because their backgrounds are different from the mainstream. Sometimes, teachers or administrators view individual immigrants and immigrant groups as all the same, as a kind of "problem" that must be solved.

**In contrast, whole language teachers have faith in their students.**

They recognize that when they revalue their bilingual learners, those students can begin to revalue themselves.

**False Assumption #7: Learning should take place in English.**

It seems logical that if we want students to be fluent in English, we should teach them in English.

**But actually: Research shows that using students' primary language is the fastest way to both English proficiency and academic competence.**

Whole language teachers advocate the use of a second language learner's first language in school for several reasons: (1) bilingual students build important background knowledge and concepts in their first language, and these concepts transfer into English; (2) bilingual students come to value their own language and culture; and (3) bilingual students maintain important family ties and become valuable bilingual members of the larger community.

Teachers make learning easier for their bilingual students by rejecting false assumptions and developing language programs consistent with the whole language principles outlined here.

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# Why Thoughtful Teachers Abhor Censorship

Over the years, educators have wondered if censorship were getting worse. There is some reason to think that it is indeed becoming more common. For example, the efforts of Bill Honig, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and of classroom teachers to use "real literature—with real values and ideals—not soft, shallow children's stories, [to] restore high quality literature to its key place in the curriculum" has run into parents troubled by the "real literature." A humorous retelling of Little Red Riding Hood in which Red took a bottle of wine to her grandmother was refused admittance to the Culver City, California schools because, as one school official announced, the book "condones the use of alcohol." Far more serious, the Impressions series (originally published by the Canadian division of Holt, Rinehart and Winston) has been widely attacked in California by Citizens for Excellence in Orange County and by the Traditional Values Coalition led by the Rev. Lou Sheldon, Jerry Falwell's heir apparent. Impressions, so critics allege, contains literature that is too violent, too occult, too depressing, too fantastic, and altogether unsuitable for young people. In late 1990, state textbook advisory committees in Georgia and North Carolina bowed to similar parental pressures and decided not to accept Impressions in their states. The adoption of Impressions has been challenged in several other states as well.

Library books under attack in the last few years reflect all sorts of pressures. Shel Silverstein's poem "Little Abigail and the Beautiful Pony" has been banned because it "encourages suicide"; Maurice Sendak's In the Night Kitchen because it "had nudity and offensive morality"; Thomas Rockwell's How to Eat Fried Worms because it "gave children terrible ideas"; Alvin Schwartz's Cross Your Fingers, Spit in Your Hat because it "taught witchcraft." Objections to these books and to books as different as Norma Klein's Naomi in the Middle, Lois Lowry's Anastasia Krupnik, and Jack Prelutsky's Nightmare: Poems to Trouble Your Sleep are unfortunately typical and predictable to educators. Not as predictable but frightening and horrifying, was a recent attack in Idaho on Chaim Potok's My Name Is Asher Lev. After a teacher assigned the book to a class, a student returned the book the next day and announced, "My family and I don't believe in Israel. We hate Jews. My parents want me to read something else."

Out of the attacks, and some outright bannings, educators can make five assumptions, all painfully safe.

(1) Any work is potentially censorable to someone, someplace, sometime, for some reason.

(2) The newer the work, the more likely the censorship.

(3) The louder and closer the censorship incident, the greater the fear produced in nearby schools.

(4) Censorship is arbitrary and capricious, hitting here for no better reason than that it doesn't hit there.

(5) Censorship is, for too many educators, like cancer or highway accidents—something they don't concern themselves with because they think it happens only to other people.

Why does censorship hit schools? Because books have multiple purposes, or multiple effects. Books can interest us, or amuse us, maybe even inspire us. With those three virtues, most potential censors would hardly question the joys of reading. However, reading can lead to far more. Books can challenge us and educate us, and that's enough to make censors a bit nervous. Furthermore, books can make us wonder or question or doubt the status quo, and that concerns many parents, for most of us want our children to adopt our values and ideals. But censors are more than concerned. They are frightened that their children may think, may question, may wonder, worse yet, may doubt their own parental teachings.

What does censorship do when it hits a community? It depresses the intellectual climate and stifles the freedom to read and think. It makes all of us prisoners of guardians no better or more moral or more intelligent than we are.

What does it tell young people when adults (whether parents or educators) keep ideas and materials from them? It tells young people that thinking is dangerous, and some ideas or materials are so incendiary that young people must be protected from them. It tells young people that they cannot be trusted.

And, of course, despite all the efforts of protective parents, censorship ultimately fails with individuals. Nothing attracts young people so much as forbidden fruit, or a forbidden novel, and young people denied the right to read may decide to read. Nothing in this world can stop readers from finding a novel they are determined to read. But a society, a nation, or a school district in which the tyranny of censorship reigns and educators are denied the right to educate is doomed to mediocrity at best, because it is based on fear—fear of ideas, fear of anything different, fear of what someone has determined is suspect or controversial, and ultimately fear of fear itself. In that society, education is impossible, for education does not lock students into the past but frees them to envision and create a different future.

That is why educators must fight censors and censorship and every attack on every book. Can't we, as some teachers have maintained, give in on a book here or there to placate the censors? The answer ought to be obvious: No, we can't. If we grant Mrs. Jones' right to get Judy Blume's Deenie off the shelves because it promotes masturbation, how can we deny Mr. Smith's demand that we get Shel Silverstein's books off our shelves because Silverstein once wrote and drew for Playboy? Or Ms. Brown's insistence that we delete Dr. Seuss' The Lorax because it is unduly pro-environment? Or the Rev. Ipswitch's plea to remove Alice Childress' A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a

Sandwich because it encourages young people to use filthy language?

After censorship starts, where does it end? The answer is with more and more slavery unless educators fight it. And that, of course, assumes that educators, parents, and others in the community believe in education.

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# Statement of the International Reading Association

**MAY 1, 1991**

## THE DANGERS OF CENSORING TEXTBOOKS AND READING PROGRAM MATERIALS

*The International Reading Association, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting literacy worldwide, has over 350,000 affiliated members in more than 60 countries. In the United States, the Association has members in every state and a broad network of local, state, and regional councils. As literacy advocates, we are committed to preserving freedom of expression and strongly oppose censorship in any form.*

Much of the controversy surrounding the use of certain reading textbook series in public schools is rooted in a blatant and misdirected attempt to impose censorship—to limit and define student access to a rich variety of written materials and to impose the religious and political views of a small segment of society on those whose views may be different. The Association respects the beliefs of parents and others who are concerned about the contents of textbook series or other materials, and we believe in their right to express their misgivings. It is precisely because we are committed to such freedom of expression that we are speaking out now. It should be clear that all voices need to be heard in order to respect this freedom, and that any attempt at censorship by one group today can lead to censorship of that same group tomorrow. This is a risk that we cannot take.

Internationally, both history and recent experience clearly show that where censorship and control of ideas exist, tyranny and dictatorship flourish. It is well documented that literacy promotes freedom and democracy. Where censorship lives, free expression dies and citizens lose their right to consider or to express a wide variety of facts, ideas, and beliefs.

An educator from Argentina, Roxana Morduchowicz, has eloquently stated the case for freedom of expression and information in her description of what happened to Argentine schoolchildren as their country moved from a military dictatorship to the beginnings of democracy in the early 1980's. In a book about intellectual freedom being considered for publication by the International Reading Association, she writes, "For eight years, schoolchildren and old people lived under the same conditions: fear, silence, censorship. The school's front door was locked to ideas, and the problems of the real world could not be discussed." She goes on to describe the difficulties Argentine teachers, parents, and children faced as the change in govenment occurred: "How could we teach children who had known only authoritarianism that suddenly they lived under democracy and were allowed to speak freely? How could we teach children what democracy meant and what freedom of expression was?" The tragedy of censorship became clear when teachers realized that these children did not understand the concepts of free thought and free expression.

Now U.S. schools face the very real danger of suppression of intellectual diversity. When children have access to reading materials that express only one point of view, that diversity and the idea of free expression are lost. On the other hand, when schools expose chldren to a wide variety of reading materials carefully chosen by skilled professionals, children will by example learn the importance of intellectual freedom.

The International Reading Association urges state and local education agencies to uphold the principle of intellectual freedom and to resist any effort to censor reading textbook series, or any other type of instructional materials, that have been carefully, systematically, and professionally judged to be valuable resources for teachers and children. Failure to retain or adopt such reading materials because of sincerely held but limited or biased views will restrict the ability of our schools to meet the needs of our children.

The International Reading Association is concerned about censorship efforts in all parts of the world. The debate over the control of school programs has a long history; occasionally the debate erupts into conflict and even violence. School programs and materials may come under attack by individuals or groups with narrow interests. Even though it is widely recognized that one purpose of reading is to learn about diversity in the world, certain

individuals or groups would at times deny students the right to read about other cultures, customs, and beliefs. Often materials and reading programs are eliminated or drastically modified as a result of non-instructional considerations. We believe that such forms of censorship are damaging not just to those whose beliefs are excluded but to society as a whole.

In support of this perspective, the International Reading Association adopted the following resolution at its May 1988 convention in Toronto:

*RESOLVED, that the International Reading Association commend those state, provincial and local educational agencies which support the professional judgment of reading and language arts teachers when self-appointed censors attempt to restrict the students' freedom to read, and be it further*

*RESOLVED, that IRA condemn attempts by those with narrow interests to deprive students of quality reading programs; that IRA condemn efforts by those with narrow interests to prevent or disrupt objective discussion of materials and school reading program issues; and that IRA widely publish and disseminate this resolution and the 1986 resolution on textbook adoption to legislators, boards of education, professional organizations, chief state and provincial school officers and school administrators.*

The International Reading Association congratulates all participants in this debate for their expressions of interest and belief. The Association is committed to the concept of intellectual freedom and to the preservation of this freedom in schools throughout the United States and the world. We recognize the importance and sincerity of all the views being shared on this matter. The words attributed to the great French philosopher, Voltaire, ring true in this instance: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

The Association's perspective is direct and straightforward and, as such, will probably upset or offend some who hear it. Our point of view is only one of many, however strongly our 350,000 affiliated members may feel about it. Yet it is rooted in the history and political traditions the United States has always represented. Freedom of expression—particularly the American style of freedom, with its great diversity and openness—has been an inspiration to and an aspiration of peoples in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe.

The Association does not seek to approve or endorse a particular textbook series or written work. Its role is to point out the serious dangers inherent in any attempt at censorship. To reject a reading textbook series after it has been approved by a school board and curriculum review committee would be bowing to censorship. It would also open the door for vocal minorities to pursue scores of similar cases involving other books or materials. Freedom of expression and freedom to choose are what give us the strength to reject censorship. In the words of an ancient Chinese proverb, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

[Note: The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has submitted a letter that supports the Association's position and states NCTE's strong opposition to censorship of classroom materials.]

*This statement was prepared by staff members of the International Reading Association for use by Association councils, affiliates, and related groups.*

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# How Teachers Can Productively Respond to Political Conflicts About Education in Their Communities

Educational debate is to be expected in a diverse society—it's as American as apple pie. We have different views about the curriculum, the role of the teacher, and the manner in which students should be taught. For the system to work we agree that everyone should have the right to share their views and to participate in the process of influencing those who make policies. The ground rules call for an adherence to decent interaction, to rules of evidence, and to procedures established for the democratic resolution of our differences. Our integrity and commitment to the democratic process is essential. Moreover, it is vital that citizens and educators become involved in the important process of open, public debate. It is only through the participation of informed and caring citizens that we can assure that our children will develop as thoughtful, independent, tolerant, democratic citizens of a pluralistic society.

Unfortunately, the process does not always work as we would like. There are times when individuals and groups have sought to limit or distort ideas. The rights of teachers and students to examine important issues have sometimes been clouded with fear. How shall we deal with such concerns?

**1. Prepare for community conflict before the conflict occurs.** It is important that each school establish on-going public relations programs which explain school curricula, policies and programs and which maintain a liason between the school and diverse interests in the community. Contact with business, religious and political leaders and the press is essential for the orderly resolution of conflict.

**2. Establish procedures for dealing with conflict and stick to the procedures.** Clearly stated procedures regarding textbook selection, teacher retention, curricula, and so on helps reduce conflict. Such procedures should require that all complaints be in writing and signed by the complainant. A committee structure designed to review the complaints should be established. Time should be provided for all interested persons to present their views.

**3. Do your homework.** Often, groups seeking to influence schools develop predictable strategies, designed by a national organization. Understanding these strategies takes homework and careful follow-through. Guest speakers, books and films can provide insights into the influence of these national organizations. Materials circulated about the schools can be identified and exposed to the public.

**4. Remember the honorable role of educators in a democracy: to maintain freedom of inquiry.** It is up to administrators, school board members and teachers to demonstrate to all concerned that procedures will be followed, that everyone will have an opportunity to present their views, and that decency, evidence, and democracy will be insisted on. The moral fibre of a community and a school can be maintained by strong leadership during times of stress.

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